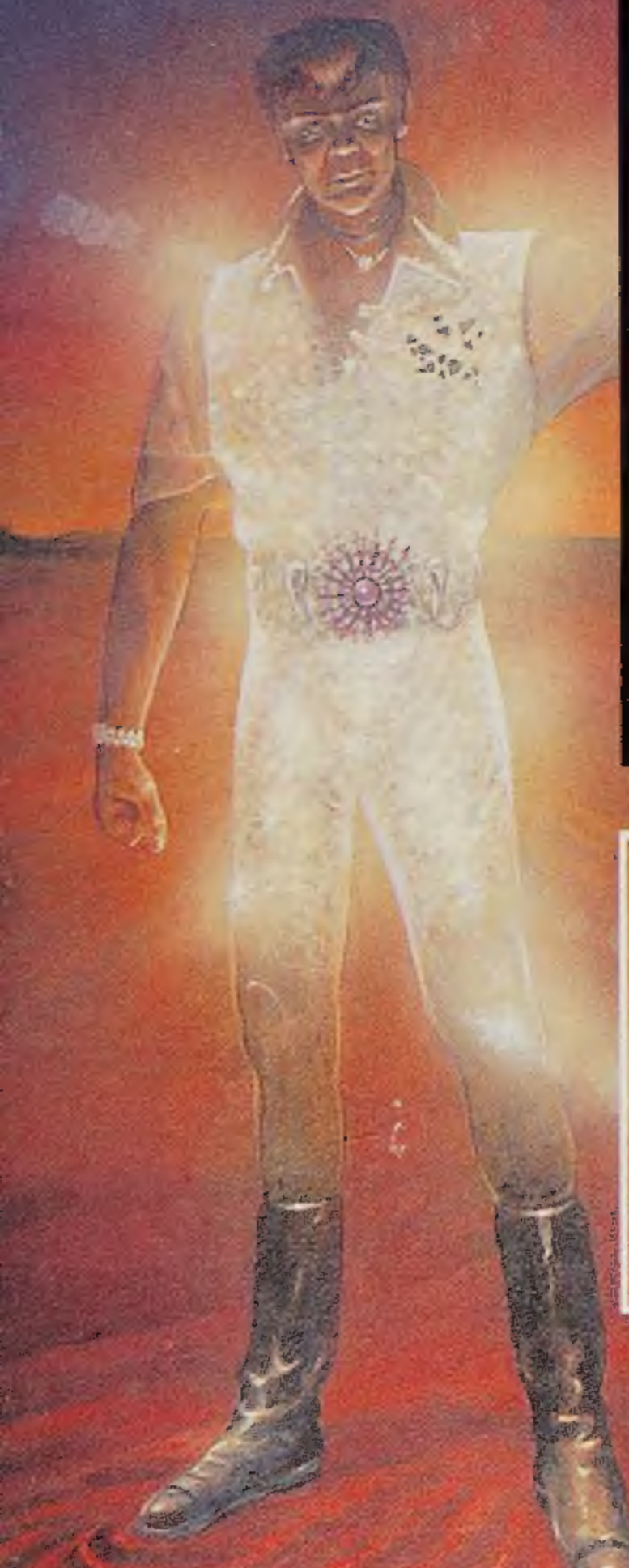
MORTAL FIRE



BEST AUSTRALIAN SF

PRESENTED BY

TERRY DOWLING & VAN IKIN

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MORTAL FIRE

TERRY DOWLING is the author of many science fiction stories and is the only writer to have won nine of Australia's Ditmar Awards for fiction. His publications include four linked collections, *Rynosseros*, *Wormwood*, *Blue Tyson*, and *Twilight Beach*. He reviews science fiction, fantasy and horror for *The Australian* and is also a musician and songwriter, appearing regularly on the ABC's *Mr Squiggle and Friends*. He lives in Sydney where he teaches a college communications course. He has been called "one of our finest futurists" (*Independent Monthly*) and one of the "finest imaginative minds of the 1990s" (*Canberra Times*)

VAN IKIN began writing science fiction at the age of 16 and his work has appeared in many publications. He has edited two previous anthologies of science fiction and has reviewed science fiction, fantasy and horror for the *Sydney Morning Herald* for the last ten years. He has a PhD in Australian Literature and is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia. He has twice won the Australian Science Fiction Achievement Award for Best Editor as well as the William Atheling Award for Criticism. In 1992, when he won the inaugural A. Bertram Chandler Award for achievement in the field of science fiction, *The Australian* called him a "supernova" and a "doyen of the genre".

Terry Dowling and Van Ikin first met during their student days and in 1977 launched the critical journal, *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature*. *Mortal Fire* is their first collaboration on a book-length work.

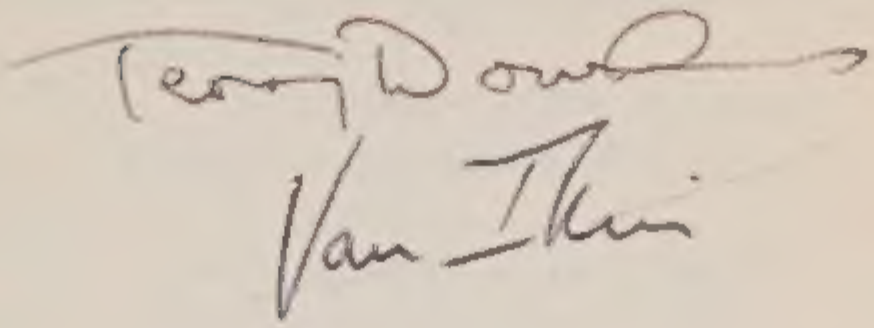
This book is for our parents:

Marie and Bill Dowling
Anne and George Ikin

Terry Dowling and Van Ikin
present

MORTAL FIRE

Best Australian SF



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Three students from the University of Western Australia—Deb Fitzpatrick, Elizabeth Hardy, Genevieve Hegney—for words of encouragement at the right times.

Introduction

Back in 1968 (when Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* was just filling the screens, and American astronauts had embarked upon the first manned Apollo mission), John Baxter's historic *First Pacific Book of Australian SF* appeared. Its Introduction began with the following:

> Ten years ago, the American writer Robert Bloch addressed a verse to the sf fans of Australia. The body of this work has since, perhaps mercifully, been lost, but a final couplet remains in the memory of some local readers. "Tell me now, you folks down under," Bloch asked, "Do you have a sense of wonder?"[1]

Baxter's anthology (and its sequel, *The Second Pacific Book of Science Fiction*) served to demonstrate that Aussies *do* have a sense of wonder.

At Sydney University in the early 1970s, the inspiration of these books launched two would-be-if-could-be Promethean flights. Terry Dowling embarked upon the University's first postgraduate dissertation on science fiction,[2] and also began to conceive a mythical Australia in which great sandships rolled across exotic deserts. Van Ikin began to wonder just *how long* we Australians had had our sense of wonder, prompting a years-long scholarly inquiry into the origins and history of Australian sf.[3] In 1977 (after some years of planning) these two streams of sf enthusiasm merged in the launching of the critical journal, *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature*, which still struggles on to this day.[4]

Don't get the wrong idea from this. We're not saying that Australian sf *is* us, or that it *started* with us, or centres on us. We're just two dudes who've been sitting on stools in the sf bar (okay: all the sf bars) and who have

enjoyed the rich cosmopolitanism of the conversations, the music, the ideas, the outlook . . . Australian science fiction is lots of writers and works and arguments and viewpoints; we're just the guys who thought we'd have a go at *celebrating* it all.

We like the sf bar; it upholds a vision. Story-telling is *in*, for there's a demotic belief that the punters deserve some entertainment-return for their cash. Ideas and insights are equally *in*, for there's also a belief that entertainment doesn't have to mean mindless chases and shoot-outs. The customers here actually enjoy mental stimulation . . . and it gives us two dudes a warm inner glow to see that entertainment and intelligence *can* mesh . . .

The mob that's gathered here isn't afraid of high culture. It's true that they talk as much about Stephen Hawking and David Suzuki as H.G. Wells and Patrick White—but that's another plus, for it means they've reached across the barriers of C.P. Snow's "two cultures". The really delightful thing is that they also allow for significance to lie in the icons of so-called popular culture as well. *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* are accorded significance alongside, say, *The Tempest* or T.S. Eliot or Keats (to cite three works which have been the subject of notable sf re-adaptations).[6]

In a recent issue of the American magazine *Science Fiction Age*, Scott Edelman graciously paid tribute to sf's legacy in his life:

> The novels of Robert Heinlein [. . .] taught me that one competent person could accomplish anything.
>
> From Stan Lee and Marvel comics, I learned that with great power came great responsibility.
>
> Rod Serling and his classic television series *The Twilight Zone* taught me that things were not always as they at first seemed, that there was indeed "a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man".
>
> From Ray Bradbury, I learned that there could be poetry in prose.

> The short stories of Theodore Sturgeon [. . .] showed me that love was nothing of which a man (or alien) had any reason to be ashamed.
>
> The wit and bite of Harlan Ellison taught me that one never had to lose one's passion.
>
> The original *Star Trek* series showed me a future of hope one wherein humanity would pull itself back from the brink of nuclear insanity and somehow survive to a future in which the planet Earth was more important than any single country's boundaries
>
> (*Science Fiction Age* Vol. 1, No. 2 (1993); p.6)

That's not pitting James T. Kirk against Hamlet, or weighing the ideas in an episode of *The Outer Limits* against the insights of *Brideshead Revisited*. It's just breaking down the false *imprimatur* that heaps importance on the "mainstream" and denies significance to the "popular". We think it's vital to break down these rigid distinctions and allow work to contend against work in terms of what is *really* at stake—the issue of *meaning* and *feeling*. (Sure, *Hamlet* is more profound than even the best episode of *The Twilight Zone*, but the mega profundity of *Hamlet* should not extinguish the voice of Rod Serling's worthier writers.)

One of the most heartening differences between the first (1979) edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* and its second (1993) edition is that the entry on Australian sf has grown from just a couple of columns to nearly two full pages. This reflects the output of new Australian sf in recent years, and also the process of rediscovery of earlier works. It's a sign that there's something to celebrate.

The current state of Australian sf is so strong that it would have been wrong to sub-title this collection "*The* Best Australian Science Fiction". It is *a* "best Australian sf", that's all. Two honest personal selections, made from two ends of the continent, and by two people who are often very dissimilar in lifestyle and temperament—but

who knew they could agree on a selection, and, indeed, who probably knew what many of the selections would be, long before they embarked upon the formal process of choosing.

Let's be very clear about this. We're saying—admitting!—that you could fill every page of this book with alternative selections. But that's the whole point—the time is ripe! That's the real triumph celebrated by a collection like this: the triumph that in a country still barely able to support a mass-market sf magazine, and where authors more often than not have to compete for places in American and British publications, we have nevertheless reached the point where there are enough fine stories to justify this book . . . and others like it.

We've taken pains, and tried to be rigorous, in selecting these stories. We have plundered overseas magazines for eligible Australian works (aided by their annual Readers' Polls and Recommended Reading lists), and we have read through the stories which have won awards for Aussie writers. That in itself has been a hell of a lot of reading, but it was only the start. There were also the nineteen previous Australian sf anthologies to work through, plus the growing number of single-author collections (whether marketed as sf or not), and the local sf magazines, past and present, like *Omega Science Digest*, *Aphelion*, *Aurealis*, *Eidolon*, and *Void*. So we've had ample material to choose from.

There was ample time, as well. This collection has been in the making for 19 years and 8 months!

That's not true of course; not in one way. Discussions about a "best Australian sf" selection started in 1987, over glasses of sangria at Sydney's now late lamented *Mexico City* restaurant, and were gradually worked into shape over superb cappuccinos at Perth's late-lamented *Tradewinds* cafe.[8] By 1988, must-consider stories were whizzing across the Nullarbor, and the fax setting out the shorter short-list was despatched early in 1993. At time of writing, though, it is exactly 19 years and 8 months since Dowling

and Ikin had their first important conversation together,[9] and that's an ur-milestone in this book's history.

In another sense, though, *Mortal Fire* has been even more than *thirty* years in the making.

For Van Ikin this book had its beginnings in the comic-book racks of the Strathfield newsagency and the rows of paperback sf in a long-gone bookshop at the top end of Burwood Road. All those fabulous lurid covers with fanged sea-monsters rising from the deeps, or shadowy aliens creeping furtively from their just-landed space-disc! There was the derelict cinema out on Parramatta Road which still displayed a weathered poster for the Midnight Special, so that *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* seemed to roar out of the swamps whenever Dad drove us past on the way to the Blue Mountains. There was *Gorgo*, too, a dinosaur-flick with a poster so utterly terrifying that for months it was impossible to check out the *Sydney Morning Herald* movie-page in case the fearful dinosaur should still be lurking (A 12-year-old child was not allowed to see such disturbing movies . . . but he could dream, oh yes.)

So: does this bout of nostalgia signify that sf grows out of a love of monsters?

Not at all. In fact, looking back, one can see that it never was a love of monsters. This may sound very pretentious, but it's also true: the appeal of sf stems from an intellectual persuasion that the world is not known and exhausted, not grasped and packaged. It's a belief that "There are more things in heaven and earth . . .", but it's a post Shakespearian, age of science formulation of that belief. When Hamlet speaks his famous lines to Horatio, he means that other things *are* out there, waiting for us to stumble upon them. (*He* could be talking monsters.) But the teenager (as he was, by then) who haunted the bookracks of Burwood Road (and who had started writing short stories of his own) that teenager grasped something that Hamlet did not. (Shakespeare did, but not

Hamlet.) Like every teenage bookworm with a passion for sf, he sensed that we *create* and *shape* the future; that it grows from us and is conceived by us—that we are it and it is us, and that it is nevertheless *bigger* than us.

For Terry Dowling, those same comics and monster movies (shown as midnight doubles every New Year's Eve at Gladesville's Palace cinema) were crucial, as were the Captain W.E. Johns space adventures, a Woolworths' sale of sf paperbacks in 1962, and a subsequent classroom trade for old issues of *Amazing* and *Fantastic*. It didn't take much to make the world even more strange and wonderful than it already was. No desert was more pregnant with alien menace than the Universal sound-stage in *It Came from Outer Space*, no pyramid more labyrinthine and wondrous than the one in *Land of the Pharaohs*. Like Hollywood, sf re-made the commonplace and revealed new possibility, coaxing out the cathartic emotions, the curiosity, the unease, the sense of wonder.

> *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,*
> *Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

In 1990, in the collection *Glass Reptile Breakout and Other Australian Speculative Stories*, the role of sf was summarized as follows:

> The function of sf is *not* merely to say: *This is what lies on the road ahead.* Sf has a dual function, part of which is to say *This is what MAY lie on the road ahead IF we proceed in our present direction* In this respect its role is to coax us to understand that the future is seeded in the reality of here-and-now (which means that the way we shape our own lives and society and attitudes is significant and consequential). Paradoxically, the other aspect of its function is to *break down* any monolithic sense of "the present" and to *question* "the reality of the here-and now" . . .[10]

Sf is a philosophy; it's a mode of thinking.

When you've been hanging round the sf world for more than twenty years, people do begin to regard you as a voice for the genre. Sometimes, in a relaxed moment, they'll even open up their souls to you: "I don't read much science fiction, actually", or, "It's kids' stuff really, isn't it; I mean you don't see adults reading it, do you?"

The latter response requires you to keep a straight face and just play it down the line: *Nope, no adults here, chum.* (Certainly not *all* of us, anyhow . . .) These people are only brushing aside one of the major thought-forms of the twentieth century and the one field of literary endeavour which has never renounced the ideal of good, entertaining story-telling . . .

When you are seen to be a voice for *Australian* science fiction, one particular comment is often forthcoming and insistent. "Why do we need Australian sf when Australia is such a small time player in technology and has no real part in the space-race?"

We don't think that's a very good question (for too many of its assumptions are dead wrong), but it's asked so frequently that it must be accepted as a genuine concern. Moreover, we hear it at science fiction conventions as well as at mainstream literary events, so it is clearly a genuine concern that is widely held. It is a tricky question to answer, for there are no less than *three* major misconceptions that have to be set right, but over the years we have evolved a standard response-routine which goes like this:

DOWLING (usually firing the first shot, for he's the one whose energy most quickly finds its words): *The central issue here is really the assumption that science fiction must always be about space or technology. That's wrong; it's not! Much of the best contemporary sf has been more concerned with the "soft" sciences like anthropology, not with hardware and gadgetry.*

IKIN (weighing in more slowly, as if this is a long-deliberated observation that cuts to the core of the matter): *It's also wrong to assume that science fiction is*

written by and for the big time players. When science fiction deals with technology, it looks at its impact upon people and society, and that involves looking at the impact on small time player-nations like Australia. Contemporary sf in particular will frequently align itself with the underdogs, looking at whizz-bang new developments from the perspective of those on the receiving end . . .

DOWLING (shifting the tone to upbeat by adding a dose of dinkum nationalism): *Australians don't need to do a cultural cringe about space and technology. Air-traffic control, for example, is an area of electronic hi-tech where we're world-leaders, and there's medical research and technology . . . It's just that Australia is a quieter achiever, a less melodramatic player . . .*

IKIN (with more flag-waving): *We may not be sending Aussies into space from Woomera, but we are involved in key tracking functions whenever an American space mission takes place. And we will one day send Australians into space, probably from Cape York . . .*

Some of the punters will still remain unconvinced—but that's because they think sf *ought* to be big-player dramas about science and technology. (*Don't give us this soft-soap stuff about quiet-achieving small-role players: we want Larry Niven!*) What can you say?

We both review sf for major Australian newspapers. Reviewing can be a salutary experience, especially in the long term: you not only develop a sense of responsibility towards your readership and the authors whose work is under review, you also receive a sustained and concentrated exposure to the latest themes and trends, and to packaging and marketing vogues. Most importantly, you have to keep learning and remembering and re-defining what a *good* story might be.

So what makes a story special? Considerations of word length and availability aside, why are these stories here?

As most editors will quickly tell you, the deciding factor can be any number of things: a single image can do it; a moment of understanding, a flash of irony or humour; a logical twist that creeps up unawares and seizes the reader with its unforeseen inevitability; an emotional chord that strikes the reader as wholly appropriate. It can be the way in which perception is altered – the degree to which, as in all good fiction, we are made to see the world, our lives, our binding reality, with new eyes. Sometimes it's a quirkiness, an obliqueness, a freshness of touch that endures; sometimes it's the way readers are made to participate and left to discover something for themselves, entering into a crucial and intimate relationship with the author.

If we have to be drawn on criteria, we might name the following qualities: *originality* (though given the range of plots and tropes, this has never been as important as it might first seem, for highly original stories can fail or date so quickly); *topicality* (through the relevance to a particular time, place, culture or social trend); *style* (when the crucial factor is not so much what the story is about as how it delivers). There's another factor, too – a certain *je ne sais quoi* which might be described as "orchestration": the way in which a story sets its voice and tone and thus creates its own momentum towards its own ineluctable end.[11] Also, many of these stories articulate what is for us the feeling (or *angst* or *gestalt* – or *angst-gestalt*?) of late twentieth-century humanity, an awareness that is eloquently expressed in David Ireland's novel, *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*:

> We know man is alienated from his true function, but what is he? What is his true function? That is the hardest question. What should he do? What should he try to be?[12]

We feel we've satisfied one or more of these criteria in each of the pieces presented here. But there's another

quality, even more elusive: the one giving this book its name, what Shakespeare called "the true Promethean fire".

Just as Prometheus dared to steal fire for humanity's betterment (as did Raven and Takkanna and Chicken Hawk and so many others in so many mythologies), so it takes an impudent, even subversive quality to go beyond *now* into the exalting, discomfiting *what if*? of our futures. *Promethean fire*: the flare and lightning of imagination, forbidden and dangerous, by which societies are chivvied and changed and individuals empowered. That is what these stories have in common for us . .

Some of that burns here.

They sparkle still the right Promethean fire;
They are the books, the arts, the academes,
That show, contain, and nourish all the world.
(*Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.iii.351 3)

—Terry Dowling and Van Ikin
Sydney and Perth, July 1993

1. Make sure that you read our footnotes, please; not all will be as dry as this one, which is just telling you that this quotation comes from p.[i] of John Baxter's anthology. (For bibliographical details, see our "Recommended Reading" section at the end.)
2. He wrote on the British sf writer J.G. Ballard, who later gained worldwide fame for his autobiographical novel *Empire of the Sun*, but whose science fiction novels are an extremely important contribution to the sf genre and to postmodern writing in general.
3. There's interesting material as far back as 1832—just a generation or so after Botany Bay —but it's not until the 1870s that things really got going.
4. Thirty-five issues to date! "*They said we'd never make it, but we finally came through . . .*" Unfortunately,

things are looking pretty bleak at the moment: the recession that we supposedly had to have[5] seems set to sink a forum that it certainly didn't hurt to have.

5. Keep Keating's notorious words in mind as you read further in this Introduction, especially when you come to the section about the role of sf.
6. Those adaptations are, respectively: the MGM film *Forbidden Planet* (1956), the Dan Simmons novels *The Hollow Man* (1993), *Hyperion* (1989) and *The Fall of Hyperion* (1990), and the Tim Powers novel *The Stress of Her Regard* (1993).
7. Excellent episodes of the original 1960s series of *The Twilight Zone* were "Little Girl Lost" and "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet", both by Richard Matheson. The second, mid-1980s series included a powerful adaptation of Harlan Ellison's "Shatterday".
8. Odd the way these places close down soon after we discover them. To avoid the hoodoo, we won't let on that the current spots are Dymock's coffee lounge in Sydney and *Cafe Confetti* in Perth . . .
9. The scene: Sydney University's Fisher Library, specifically a deserted corner of the "stack" collection. Dowling sights Ikin, who carries a copy of Ballard's novel, *Crash*. Knowing Ikin to be a fellow Honours student in English, Dowling strikes up a conversation about the book. In the course of conversation, Dowling suggests Ikin should consider the idea of editing a science fiction journal. Ikin has been planning this very thing for eighteen months, and unfolds his plans and ideas to Dowling. Some hours later . . .
10. Van Ikin (ed.) *Glass Reptile Breakout*, pp.8-9. (For bibliographical details, see "Recommended Reading".)

Did you realize that this was the section that links with Keating's comment?

The recession we had to have . . .; no science fictional thinking there! No sense that this would only

be the recession we'd *have to have* "IF we proceed in our present direction". No sense that the future was ours to shape and mould . . .

11. Although, as we have foreshadowed, it is the "ineluctable end" of many of these stories to suggest that nothing is ineluctable.
12. David Ireland, *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1971), p.25.

INHABITING THE INTERSPACES

by Philippa Maddern

The important thing was to take notice when things changed, because changes meant danger of discovery. One had to be very sharp-eyed and careful; the nightly tour of the building was enjoyable, but also a necessity the room by-room, step-by-step, space by space check that everything was as it had been.

She had a routine of her own, and that in itself was pleasant. It was good to feel the same slight regret every evening at leaving the comfort of the three-cornered cave behind the display boards stacked against the conference room wall. It was reassuring to go down, every night, and get the lumi-torch from where it sat on the window ledge of the men's toilets every day, soaking in the light to give back at night. To be sure, the torch had come into the building with her, and was not now as efficient as it had been; but then mostly she knew the building well enough to do without it. It was security, too, against the odd time when there was upheaval in the building, and she had to take to the dark spaces in the ceilings and behind the walls.

Then it was time to start the night's first purposeful potter along her own laid-out track, starting from the basement, through the canteen (picking up the odd slice of kabana or bread or soy bean munchie along the way), up around all the offices, rifling quickly through the desks,

hunting the kitchen fridges for milk, nosing among the office memos and rubbish bins, absorbing bits from the small stores of biscuits, chocolate, sugar, brandy, vitamin pills, apples in bottom drawers along the way, up to the calm carpeted rooms on the fifth floor with their nuleather chairs and wooden desks. It was a slow progress, and demanded time and concentration; yet it was reassuring to search out food bit by bit, in inconspicuous nibbles and swigs, to ponder information, snaffle forgotten keys, search the workshop for handy bits and pieces.

There were not many places she could not get into. The hidden safe in the biggest office (but that was electronically keyed to palm print and voice control) and one or two filing cabinets, whose keys she had never found and whose locks had no space for the slip of plastic which worked well elsewhere—but that was all. The rest was her territory, unchanging and manageable.

After the prowl, there might be time for racing round the building (eight minutes by the basement clock was her fastest time, locking and unlocking as she went). Or she could go to one of the offices, sit in its desk chairs, and read its in-trays, letters, and diaries; or there was the maintenance room to go through (not of course using the machines, which would be noisy, but just touching up keys with a file, or sharpening the stolen chisel which she kept in the leg pocket of her jumpsuit). Then again, there were food caches to replenish, and a wash every few nights was a good thing, a person depending heavily on their sense of smell cannot afford the distraction of their own stink.

So the night passed and, at the end, she would replace the torch, and go down to the basement, locking herself into the workroom cupboard and dozing quietly while the cleaners came and went. Then, after she had heard them shuffling and joking and bye-byeing their way out, it was time to go back to the cave in the conference room; to lie on its furry floor, watching the blade of light on its straight wall strengthen and broaden as the day grew; to drowse

through the hours, waking sometimes to the tramp shuffle of feet, the drawing back of chairs, the slap of papers on the table, and the argument of the day-people's voices; until the dark came, and it was time to start again.

Once upon a time (so the story in her head ran), a girl like her had walked briskly through the daytime doors, into the lift, up to the second floor, into the personnel manager's office. There she had had her papers stamped, and walked out, falsely calm, marginally cool, intelligence thinly overlaying terror, into yet another office, after another regulation 40-day lay-off, into another regulation 20-day work shift. In despair at the constant sickening shifts of living, she had approached the console, been assigned a desk—and found there, for the first time in such a situation, traces of the previous occupant. There on the wall, beside the chair but below desk-level, was a collection of pictures, cuttings, and extracts –all size-reduced, it is true, and taped very inconspicuously to the cool cream plaster, but nevertheless evidence of some continuity, some stability.

She spent the rest of the day dropping hand-scanners and sheets of paper and trays of clips so that, in pretending to search for them, she could read, gradually, the whole collection. It was fortunately eclectic rather than sequential. A few details stuck in her mind still, ingenious limericks a series of cartoons about the consistent hopelessness of a child playing baseball, a small poem about mice and men living in the spaces left vacant by each other. But mostly it was the underlying premise that continuity was possible that she remembered. Outside, in the sliding networks of the world, people moved endlessly from city to city, following the minuscule regional rises in job placements, restless anonymous conglomerate crowds. Here beside her desk was stability.

It was, indeed, a seminal time in her life, a time when all occurrences clicked neatly into one implication, without

volition on her part. One day there was a momentary power failure, and she saw the office for a moment safe and calm, all its efficiencies and activity smoothed out by the weight of the dark. Another time, at tea break someone commented on the strange coincidences of his coming back here as a clerk when he had been a cleaner here last year. Someone else asked what the cleaning shift was like, and he said, not bad, except for the hours—having to get to work at five-thirty every morning nearly killed him. Potential difficulties solved themselves at every step. Utilitarian fashions were in, so it was easy and inconspicuous to buy a well-pocketed black jumpsuit. A notice appeared on the fridge at work—

> THERE HAVE BEEN COMPLAINTS IN THE PAST WEEK OF FOOD THEFTS FROM THIS FRIDGE; IF THESE DO NOT CEASE THE FRIDGE WILL BE REMOVED

—but everyone said it was only a threat, because these things worked themselves out with change of shifts. Every day, it seemed, new motivations appeared. Newsprints reported moves to shorten working shifts and promote longer and more varied lay-offs, in view of the rising production/population ratio. A friend died; he had gone swimming while on a high, and his companions reported that he had said, 'The deep sea is beautiful,' then simply closed his eyes and sank as if by will-power. Not realising what he was doing, and being somewhat high themselves, they had failed to rescue him.

It was easy, after that, to imagine him sliding beneath the nervously shining surface of the sea, deeper and deeper into the green space beneath, trails of perfect silver bubbles marking his path downwards. Always in her mind the bubbles rose quickly at first, and then increasingly slowly, and at last stopped; and they and his body hung suspended in a great stillness.

So one night before the end of her shift, this girl, instead of leaving the building, had locked herself in a cupboard, and waited for the lights to go out. Afterwards,

she had wandered, panicky and exhilarated, around the few rooms to which she had access. Early in the morning, she had walked out unchallenged, and spent the rest of the day in the carpark, in the company of four sleeping meths drinkers.

At the end of her shift, she bought an expensive new lumi-torch, told all her acquaintances that she was going to spend her forty days bush walking around Hattah Lakes, and hinted that she was thinking of taking off for Central Australia. On the last day, she walked into the building carrying a limited-life plastic bag with a supply of food, the torch, a screwdriver, and other odds and ends which she thought would be useful. Most of them proved instead to be useless, and were ditched. The few good choices she carried around with her all the time. A lot of the food was eaten by mice (she cached it in the wrong places). The bag, dropped from a window, sat tangled in the sun for a few days before degrading into invisibility, and she disappeared from the unstable glare of her daytime life.

She still thought of that girl often, not exactly for the pleasure of the memory, but because the contrast between her inefficiency and clumsiness then, and her present wisdom and knowledge and skill, was comfortingly sharp. That first girl's life, for some weeks, had been full of alarms, noisy mistakes, unseen opportunities, missed information. Now, her life had settled, for the first time ever, into a constant routine, every day and every night the same, for ever and ever.

Fairly regularly she revisited the picture sequence by her original desk, noting with some pleasure the failure of attempts to clean it off (the original compiler had cannily used bond tape, which was now firmly integrated into the plaster) and the occasional small additions (moustaches on the cartoon figures). But this time, as she faced it, an inkling of more serious unfamiliarity with her surroundings

made itself felt. The sequence, on closer inspection, proved to be the same; but something in the room was different.

Switching off the torch, she sat back on her heels, and considered. New sounds? Draught? Temperature change? Smell —smell, yes, there was a whiff of something unusual here. By licking her finger and rubbing it on her nose, she brought it up stronger a metallic, chemical smell, not immediately threatening, but suspicious. Careful prowling tracked it down to a desk at the opposite end of the room; the smell was printing ink from a newsprint lying open on the desk top, the cheap quick-drying ink of a tabloid print-out, very rarely smelt in the office.

Now that she had identified it, she could afford to be curious. Opening the torch, she played the light over the page. At first, it was disappointing, nothing but fuzzy pictures with meaningless captions; then her eye caught the paragraph scanned in red to mark the reader's interest. It ran:

> *'HUMAN MOUSE-TRAPPED. Mice? Rats? or just a new life style? London police reported today the capture of a man they claim has lived in an office building for eight years unknown to regular workers. "'He must have been a regular human mouse, stealing food, sleeping in corners," said one of his "trappers". 'Message for any other mice is "Watch Out", though— I hear there's new kinds of traps getting ready for them.*
>
> *'Otherwise—who knows?—might be just the life for some of you "mousy" types out there. . . .'*

And so on, filling up space with a lack of information.

She stood for a while, pondering over it, and whether it might be a threat. On the one hand, it was in London, which was a long way away, and it had nothing really to do with her. On the other, the whole article began to seem like a little eye, peering up at her inquisitively from the desk top. It made her angry; what right did they have to take someone out of his home territory? But then again, what could she do about it? She never moved papers on

desks; that was asking to be found out. For a moment she thought of putting it into the shredder. Would the owner think the cleaners had taken it? Or would he simply forget about it? It depended, of course, on how important it was to the owner (H Jorgensen, according to the panel on the desk). But how was she to know? It was scanned, so Jorgensen must have requested it, but why? For passing curiosity? Or, if not that, for what possible other reason?

She dithered for some time but, in the end, left the paper untouched. Instead she went down to the maintenance room and resharpened her chisel, feeling somehow that it was the safest thing to do

Next evening, when she went to check H Jorgensen's desk, it was properly empty, and only the faintest whiff of tabloid ink lingered above it.

The following night, she knew the instant she crawled out of the cave that there was something wrong in the building. Crouched dead still at the entrance, she searched through all the impressions coming to her out of the dark for the one who had alerted her; and, at last, heard again the ominous sound. Footsteps. Footsteps; not close, a floor away, maybe. She raced silently for the angle in the corridor which sheltered the heating pipes, and put her head against it. Down the pipes from the floor above, the echoes came plainly. Pace pace pace, stumble, clang. Shuffle. Pace pace. Silence Pace pace pace.

She thought. Once or twice there had been people in the building at night, but mainly in the big offices of the half-time permanents upstairs, but never for long. This might be the same, though it did not sound so. Neglecting the lumi-torch, she ran for the stairs and went up them as quickly and silently as a draught. The room on the corner had a window which overlooked the office where the footsteps sounded. Opening and closing the door with hardly a click, she moved in, avoided the table, and crept up to the window. If it was a day-person, there should be a light showing.

There was no light. All the long windows of the office were as blank as black paper in the thin gloom of the city. Worried, she moved to the corner of the room, near the pipes, and listened again. For a moment there was nothing; surely the person could not have got out so soon? But then, clear and loud, she heard the steps again, coming towards the near door of the office. As they halted, next to her but for the wall, she held her breath and heard, over the thumping of her own heart, the breathing of the person in the office, then the snap of the lock turning, then the door dragging over the carpet, and then the steps again moving out into the corridor.

There was a row of low seats along the corridor wall of the room, and she was under them in a fraction of a second, in case the intruder should come in. But, listening at the skirting board, she heard the steps go faltering on down the corridor, right to the dead end at the west wall, and come back again, and veer off towards the stairs.

She lay a moment to give the person time to move on, and to consider what to do. If it was only a day-person, it would not be long, but then day-people very seldom walked in the dark. Always before, she had been able to trace their progress through the building by the lights switched on and off, until they lit themselves safely out the door. But what if the person were a burglar? But then not many burglars worked in complete dark, either. A burglar would not be hard to cope with—she could avoid anyone like that all night, easily—but what would be the consequences? Quick to see the worst, her mind leapt to a picture of burglar alarms attached to every door. That would make things very difficult; not impossible, because she could dismantle some alarms, but difficult. Or what if the intruder were a security person? But there seemed no sense in having so slow and inefficient a security check.

She could simply keep out of the way all night; but then she would never know what the person had come for. Ignorance was dangerous. In the end, information could be more important than food. She wriggled out from under

the chairs, and listened at the pipe again. The footsteps were still going down the stairs, but very faintly now. It was safe to come out of the room, and go fast-pace through the office and out and down the back stairs, to check on the intruder's route through the lower floors.

All that night she shadowed the intruder, at first at a distance, and then, as she became sure of her own skill against the newcomer's ineptitude, closer—once or twice, so close that she could catch the body smell, and be almost sure it was male. In one way it was so easy that it bored her; he fumbled slowly through the dark along a very small circuit of the building, while she ran in beautiful clever circles around him. Yet in another, it was uncanny, frightening; for he neither worked nor stole, but only walked, heavy-footed and alien, around her territory. In the end, he stayed so late that it was nearly dawn when she watched him out of the front door, and she had no time to scrounge before the cleaners came.

Standing, hungry and tired, in the basement cupboard, she thought ahead for the day. There was no reason that she could immediately see why an intruder at night should mean an upheaval in the day. But there might be a link that she did not see, the cave might not be safe. But the cave held her best cache of food, in a sealed niche under the floor. It would still be possible to hole up in the ceilings for the day, but she had no extensive food caches in the ceilings, because of the mice. Also, the ceiling hide outs took time to reach; she would have to dislodge a light fitting and replace it behind her. There would not be time to do that and raid a food cache.

But the ceilings were undoubtedly safest; and thinking around all the hide-outs, she decided at last on the one reached through the washroom. That at least would leave her time for a drink and a piss before the day. For food, she would have to rely on the handful she always carried in her pockets, and whatever she could gather from the small ceiling caches; all right, as long as she could stock up tomorrow.

So the night did not end at its usual time, and was not restful, anyway. Standing balanced edgily on a wash basin, she prized out the light fitting, hauled herself in, and replaced it loosely behind her. After that, there was still the task (risky and slow without the lumi torch) of inching through the ceiling fittings to retrieve food caches.

Even when she had finished, and lay uncomfortably in the cold stuffiness of the ceilings, there was still the future to be considered. The longer she thought, the more unusual and potentially dangerous the intruder seemed. Irrational happenings like that often meant large-scale disturbances in the building and, in case of one occurring now, the only thing to do was to collect resources and retreat almost wholly to the ceilings for some time. It was not a pleasant thought, and would mean a lot of hard work in the coming night; but, having thought it out, she felt a little less anxious, and at last, hours into the day, could fall asleep.

When her time-sense woke her at about nine that night, she was at first bewildered at the unexpected black dark, and hard angular surroundings. The edges of bad dreams were still cutting at her attention, but there was no time to think of them. She had her program worked out –first, check for possible intruders, then general forage, and lastly, the demanding job of cleaning out food caches all over the building.

At the door of the washroom, she stopped to listen, and clenched her fists in anger as she heard, again, the slow footsteps of the intruder. Now she would have to check where he was and what he was doing before starting the night's heavy work. From the sound of it, the man was in the office on her own floor. Visualising it, she remembered that the ceiling there was beam and presspanel, not always well laid. That would probably be the best place to spy on him. She ran for the lumi-torch, then back to the washroom, and went up into the ceilings again.

With the torch, ceiling work was much quicker. It took

only a few minutes to reach the space over the office and find a crack beside one of the beams. She put her ear to it and listened; the sounds of someone in an unfamiliar place still came up clearly. Almost shutting off the torch, and angling the beam through the crack so that it just faintly lightened the dark, she squinted down. Nothing but a slice of desk and carpet. She moved to the next beam and, luckily, a slightly wider crack. Here, she could just see a blob and a curve, which resolved themselves, in a few moments, into the foreshortened arm and shoulder of the man. Then, as he took a step sideways, he swung into full view. She saw his head bent over something in his hands and, as he moved again, the thing became clearer a long tube, almost like a very old gun, but thicker, with something that might have been a dial at one end. The man was swinging it round gradually, checking the dial every few degrees. Once he moved it up until it pointed almost directly at the ceiling, and she saw the faint grey circle of its muzzle clearly; then he clicked his tongue, and returned the tube to a level, and moved on a step, so that she lost sight of him again.

Whatever he was doing was incomprehensible, and therefore worrying, but it was slow. Also, it was not immediately threatening. A little reassured, she snaked back to the washroom, shut off the torch, and fled off to the canteen, to collect waterproof containers, ferry them back to the washroom, fill them, and stack them one atop the other in rows in the ceiling.

She worked harder and faster that night than ever before in her life. She brought out her complete bunches of keys, raided the big refrigerators, recklessly pocketed whole chunks of cheese, packets of biscuits, cartons of bean-meal At first she stopped every few minutes to listen to the man working his way ponderously through the office, and its adjoining rooms. Later, the manic urge for speed and thoroughness almost overcame caution, and she went from floor to floor, rifling through the desks, taking quantities that she would never normally venture

on (but in a time of office upheaval they would not be missed). Sweating, she raced up and down the stairs from cache to cache, clearing them all—the cave, the lift well, the locked filing-cabinet drawer whose one key she had stolen long ago.

Late in the night, she came at last to her best cache, large and safe, hidden in the angle between two cupboards, boarded in (her own work) with slats stolen from the workmen who built the cupboards. It was difficult to reach, accessible only if one practically crawled inside one of the range of cupboards. Also, it was some time since she had checked it, and the slats had stiffened into place. Knowing that there was not much time, she wrenched at them roughly, aware of the noise it made only as a subsidiary factor, less important than the need to dismantle the cache.

So she was unprepared, as she backed out of the cupboard with hands full of food packages, to see the man standing in the centre of the room, pointing his metal tube at her.

Unprepared; but she had long ago learned to be quick. Before the packages had hit the floor, she had seen that he blocked her way (there was no second door to this room), and seen too that, though he had found her, he seemed hardly able to see her—standing stock-still, looking straight at her, as if he had never learned the trick of seeing sidelong in the dark.

The chisel came easily into her hand; she leapt just to the left of the man, slashing out and downwards, feeling the blade catch on cloth, then on flesh, then drag free. But the man himself had sprung back, quicker than she expected. He landed backed up hard against the door, one hand still grasping the tube, the other raised in defence, but still peering uncertainly through the gloom.

The thing might be a gun. She stopped, crouching, chisel still poised for stabbing. The man said something, and she snarled at him; belatedly, the words became meaningful, if not sensible.

'Wait; it's all right. I'm a friend.'

She did not answer, her mind crowded with plans for getting him away from the door, for killing him, for disposing of his body.

'I'm a friend,' he repeated. The tube wavered in his hand.

No point in killing him. If she hid him in her part of the building, he would stink her out, and if she put his body anywhere else, there would be an investigation. But what to do with him? She snarled again, and feinted with the chisel.

He dodged, and his head thumped against the door.

'Out,' she said, gesturing.

'I only wanted to see—'

'*Out.*' The first time she had raised her voice in the building. The ring of it, down the corridors, through the pipes, the lift shafts, the ceiling spaces, terrified her with its noise and unfamiliarity.

'I won't hurt you,' he said, moving sideways, trying to keep an eye on her.

'What's that?' She gestured to the tube.

'That? Oh, that's all right. I'm sorry. It's not a weapon or anything. It's only an infra red detector.' Then, when she did not answer, 'Really, it's all right. I made it myself. You can look at it if you like.'

He reached it out to her. She struck at him, and he jumped back, dropping the tube on the floor, where it bounced harmlessly.

They faced each other, still and tense in the dark.

He began to speak again, the words slipping out of his mouth so fast that her unpractised ear missed patches of them.

'Look, I saw this article, and I thought I'd . . . interesting . . . try for myself . . . study . . the other night, did you know? . . . okay, you're scared I . . . won't stir things up . . . find you . . .'

She laughed, and gestured with the chisel towards the door. 'Out.'

Cautiously, he backed through the doorway, and she followed, shepherding him down the corridor, out to the east stairs where the gloom was already lightening, down and around and down and around towards the exit.

At the stairs, he bravely turned his back to go down forwards. Once he said, 'I'm not going to stir things up for you, you know that, don't you?'

Unable to think of any of the terms of abuse she had once known, she flung out at him, '*Jorgensen*', the only human name she could remember.

He half turned, in surprise. 'How did you know?'

'Get out.'

'What's your name?'

But she did not answer, having forgotten it long ago.

On the ground floor, two squares of pale grey light were already lying on the entrance tiles before the door. The cleaners would soon come in. He turned on the threshold, and said, 'I could be useful, you know. You don't know, but there are ways they could find you out. You might have to move, and you wouldn't know where to go.' In the light from the door, the sticky patch on his dark shirt where the chisel had caught him was plain to see. She hesitated, unwilling to approach the door; but the sight of him, braver, feeling safer now he was near daylight, was too much for her. She feinted to his left, then doubled back neatly, and drew the chisel in an elegant line across his face from one cheek-bone to the opposite jaw. Blood sprang out to meet the blade, and he cried out, crouched hands to face, humiliated; then turned, scrabbling for the door, and stumbled out.

Shivering, she watched him run 20 metres from the building, looking back in case she was following. Then, appalled by the near daylight, she turned herself, fled upstairs, grabbed the metal tube (no time to worry about its possible dangers) and raced for the ceiling.

All the years, all the days, all the hiding, the careful secrecy, wasted. 'You only have to be wrong once.' Who

had said that, long ago? On what work shift had that ultimate arrogance terrified her? For it was true; forget once to look around, and you could be discovered.

Nothing lasts; not memories, nor time, nor place, nor safety, nor secrecy. Nothing will keep, and nobody cares about it as she does. 'It'll be all right,' they said when she wept and begged not to grow up, for childhood to last. 'It's wonderful for you young folks,' they said, 'nothing like all the unemployment when I was young' dragging her from one job, one building, to another and another and another. 'I'm a friend,' they said, tramping carelessly through her territory.

Nothing will keep.

Perhaps if one made a world, right from the start; built it piece by piece, space, stars, planets, sea, land, plants, animals, humans, cities, all with one purpose; embedded in it everywhere directives that would last for all time; all to provide one niche for its creator, a place exactly appropriate, where nothing would disturb her and she would disturb nothing; perhaps then one would be safe, one would be left alone.

But she had left a mark on someone; they knew about her now.

The metal tube fitted awkwardly into the ceiling. Squinting down at the dial, she saw in vague wavering outline the pictures of the cylinders and pipes, coiling and sprouting from each other. Following the direction of its muzzle, she saw that it must be picking up part of the hot-water system, beyond the concrete beam. So Jorgensen had told the truth about one thing, anyway. But that did not confirm the rest of his story. He was out of her reach, in a different world. She could kill him but he could safely lie to her. She waved the tube gently through the short arc of its possible movement, watching the pictures wriggle and glow on the dial.

There was little reason, now, to come out of the ceilings at all, but neither could she remain there in peace. At any

moment they might come to find her. She was always in danger. During the day, habit kept her still, but in the nights she came out for brief periods, to wander nervously around the building, imagining voices, footfalls, smells, changes, everywhere. Always, she was too afraid to stay out long, and always, returning, she thought of another place she should have checked, more information she might have looked for.

The ceilings began to fret her; the narrowness of them, the chill, always the cold smell of concrete. Narrow spaces had never worried her before; had always seemed safe, in fact. But there is a terrible difference between a niche you have chosen for yourself and a corner someone else has forced you into.

One night, driven by a great anger against the day-people, who could not even leave her to enjoy the space she had found for herself, she went back to Jorgensen's desk, longing to show him what she thought of his stupid arrogant curiosity. It would be good to threaten him, to have him afraid again. She took the chisel in her hand, ready to break his name panel, slash his chair, gouge his name in the plaster—she had thought of many pleasant ways to frighten him.

All useless, of course. She could not hurt him without betraying herself, or even attempt to harm him without betraying her own position of weakness.

The smell of paper was in the air as she approached his desk, as if conjured up by the memory of the other time she had come there. Coming closer, however, she saw that it was no hallucination—a square of paper was indeed lying there. Time, perhaps, had stopped and doubled back on itself. Maybe Jorgensen had never come and found her with his sensitive metal tube, and there were second chances after all. Yes, and maybe I did create the world as well, she thought sourly, recognising that the paper smell was different this time. An office print-out smell it was, a memo smell.

She did not really want to read it—she no longer

wanted to stay near the desk at all—but old lessons reasserted themselves (never let information go by). She shone the torch on it, and immediately the nasty word 'infra-red' caught her eye—once in the text, and again at the side of a diagram at the bottom of the sheet. A true Jorgensen word, she thought, forcing herself to read slowly, from the top:

'Memo No. 713, 8th Nov To all personnel.

'For some time, ministerial directives have been received on the subject of building security. At the last DM, the motion was put and carried that:

'A sub committee be formed to investigate methods of securing office space from intrusion and damage.

The sub committee has been in operation, and recommended to the Buildings Committee on 15th July that an A-T Model Securobot be purchased for the task. Grounds for recommendation of this particular model were as follows:

1 *Multi-purpose faculties (see diagram) including stair-climbing program.*
2 *Local manufacture, ensuring ease of servicing.*
3. *Cost-effective as per study carried out by the sub-committee (see attached sheet).*

'Accordingly, an A T Model Securobot (new) has been purchased, and will commence operations on all general areas of the third, fourth, and fifth floors from 10th Nov. Office personnel are reminded again not to leave *personal articles on or around desks after the afternoon shift, as this may impede the robot.'*

There was a diagram, with its ring of labels: 'Audio-sensors', 'Olfactory sensors (including smoke-triggering device)', 'General alarm circuits', 'Infra red scanners', 'Light scanners', 'Stair treads', 'Guaranteed 10 year power unit'.

She stood looking at the diagram for a long time thinking in a detached way what a good machine it was and how well it covered all the skills she had herself built

up over the hundreds and hundreds of hard nights. What would she not give to have eyes which would see through walls, ears to pick up pulse-beats three floors away, no need to eat?

Too late now to develop skills The day-people had found a way to take her space from her; not by coming themselves, but by a cowardly sending of their machines to drive her out.

There was nothing to be done, of course. She stayed one night longer, but the tension of waiting for the machine was too much for her. She could have faced a person —she had done so with Jorgensen—but she had no power to threaten a robot.

Early the next morning, submerging one terror in another, she went down to the doors for the last time, and stepped out into the strange light of pre dawn, and the restlessness of the wind.

There was a man standing hunched in a coat some way from the door, and she dared not wait for him to go away. As she passed him, hurrying to look for a place to hide from the day, he turned round, and she saw, out of the corner of her eye, the half healed scar running diagonally across his face.

'You saw the memo,' he called.

She walked on without answering.

'I wanted to warn you,' he said, walking a line parallel to hers, two or three metres away

'You told them,' she said; but he shook his head. The wind was blowing eddies of dust around their feet.

'I'm a researcher,' said Jorgensen, after a while. But that was like all his talk, information in a vacuum, impossible to believe one way or the other.

The light was strengthening. She saw, looking around in horror, that a great paved plain stretched on all sides of them. She and Jorgensen were the only two things moving in the vast still space.

'Soon be daylight,' said Jorgensen.

AXIOMATIC

by Greg Egan

" . . like your brain has been frozen in liquid nitrogen, and then smashed into a thousand shards!"

I squeezed my way past the teenagers who lounged outside the entrance to the Implant Store, no doubt fervently hoping for a holovision news team to roll up and ask them why they weren't in school. They mimed throwing up as I passed, as if the state of not being pubescent and dressed like a member of Binary Search was so disgusting to contemplate that it made them physically ill.

Well, maybe it did.

Inside, the place was almost deserted. The interior reminded me of a video ROM shop; the display racks were virtually identical, and many of the distributors' logos were the same. Each rack was labelled PSYCHEDELIA. MEDITATION AND HEALING. MOTIVATION AND SUCCESS. LANGUAGES AND TECHNICAL SKILLS. Each implant, although itself less than half a millimetre across, came in a package the size of an old style book, bearing gaudy illustrations and a few lines of stale hyperbole from a marketing thesaurus or some rent-an-endorsement celebrity. "*Become* God! *Become* the Universe!" "The Ultimate Insight! The Ultimate Knowledge! The Ultimate Trip!" Even the perennial, "This implant changed my life!"

I picked up the carton of *You Are Great!* its

transparent protective wrapper glistening with sweaty fingerprints—and thought numbly: If I bought this thing and used it, I would actually believe that. No amount of evidence to the contrary would be *physically able* to change my mind. I put it back on the shelf, next to *Love Yourself A Billion* and *Instant Willpower, Instant Wealth.*

I knew exactly what I'd come for, and I knew that it wouldn't be on display, but I browsed a while longer, partly out of genuine curiosity, partly just to give myself time. Time to think through the implications once again. Time to come to my senses and flee

The cover of *Synaesthesia* showed a blissed-out man with a rainbow striking his tongue and musical staves piercing his eyeballs. Beside it, *Alien Mind Fuck* boasted "a mental state so bizarre that even as you experience it, you won't know what it's like!"

Implant technology was originally developed to provide instant language skills for business people and tourists, but after disappointing sales and a takeover by an entertainment conglomerate, the first mass-market implants appeared: a cross between video games and hallucinogenic drugs. Over the years, the range of confusion and dysfunction on offer grew wider, but there's only so far you can take that trend; beyond a certain point, scrambling the neural connections doesn't leave anyone *there* to be entertained by the strangeness, and the user, once restored to normalcy, remembers almost nothing.

The first of the next generation of implants—the so-called axiomatics—were all sexual in nature; apparently that was the technically simplest place to start. I walked over to the Erotica section, to see what was available—or at least, what could legally be displayed. Homosexuality, heterosexuality, autoeroticism. An assortment of harmless fetishes Eroticization of various unlikely parts of the body. Why, I wondered, would anyone choose to have their brain rewired to make them crave a sexual practice they otherwise would have found abhorrent, or ludicrous,

or just plain boring? To comply with a partner's demands? Maybe, although such extreme submissiveness was hard to imagine, and could scarcely be sufficiently widespread to explain the size of the market. To enable a part of their own sexual identity, which, unaided, would have merely nagged and festered, to triumph over their inhibitions, their ambivalence, their revulsion? Everyone has conflicting desires, and people can grow tired of both wanting and not wanting the very same thing. I understood *that*, perfectly.

The next rack contained a selection of religions, everything from Amish to Zen. (Gaining the Amish disapproval of technology this way apparently posed no problem; virtually every religious implant enabled the user to embrace far stranger contradictions.) There was even an implant called *Secular Humanist* ("You WILL hold these truths to be self-evident!"). No *Vacillating Agnostic*, though; apparently there was no market for doubt.

For a minute or two, I lingered. For a mere fifty dollars, I could have bought back my childhood Catholicism, even if the Church would not have approved. (At least, not officially; it would have been interesting to know exactly who was subsidising the product.) In the end, though, I had to admit that I wasn't really tempted. Perhaps it would have solved my problem, but not in the way that I wanted it solved – and after all, getting my own way was the whole point of coming here. Using an implant wouldn't rob me of my free will; on the contrary, it was going to help me to assert it.

Finally, I steeled myself and approached the sales counter.

"How can I help you, sir?" The young man smiled at me brightly, radiating sincerity, as if he really enjoyed his work. I mean, really, *really*.

"I've come to pick up a special order."

"Your name, please, sir?"

"Carver. Mark."

He reached under the counter and emerged with a

parcel, mercifully already wrapped in anonymous brown. I paid in cash, I'd brought the exact change: $399.95. It was all over in twenty seconds.

I left the store, sick with relief, triumphant, exhausted. At least I'd finally bought the fucking thing; it was in my hands now, no one else was involved, and all I had to do was decide whether or not to use it.

After walking a few blocks towards the train station, I tossed the parcel into a bin, but I turned back almost at once and retrieved it. I passed a pair of armoured cops, and I pictured their eyes boring into me from behind their mirrored faceplates, but what I was carrying was perfectly legal. How could the government ban a device which did no more than engender, in those who *freely chose* to use it, a particular set of beliefs—without also arresting everyone who shared those beliefs naturally? Very easily, actually, since the law didn't have to be consistent, but the implant manufacturers had succeeded in convincing the public that restricting their products would be paving the way for the Thought Police.

By the time I got home, I was shaking uncontrollably. I put the parcel on the kitchen table, and started pacing.

This wasn't for Amy. I had to admit that. Just because I still loved her, and still mourned her, didn't mean I was doing this for her. I wouldn't soil her memory with that lie.

In fact, I was doing it to free myself from her. After five years, I wanted my pointless love, my useless grief, to finally stop ruling my life. Nobody could blame me for that.

She had died in an armed hold-up, in a bank. The security cameras had been disabled, and everyone apart from the robbers had spent most of the time face-down on the floor, so I never found out the whole story. She must have moved, fidgeted, looked up, she must have done *something*, even at the peaks of my hatred, I couldn't believe that she'd been killed on a whim, for no comprehensible reason at all.

I knew who had squeezed the trigger, though. It hadn't come out at the trial; a clerk in the Police Department had sold me the information. The killer's name was Patrick Anderson, and by turning prosecution witness, he'd put his accomplices away for life, and reduced his own sentence to seven years.

I went to the media. A loathsome crime-show personality had taken the story and ranted about it on the airwaves for a week, diluting the facts with self-serving rhetoric, then grown bored and moved on to something else.

Five years later, Anderson had been out on parole for nine months.

Okay *So what?* It happens all the time. If someone had come to me with such a story, I would have been sympathetic, but firm. "Forget her, she's dead. Forget him, he's garbage. Get on with your life."

I didn't forget her, and I didn't forget her killer. I had loved her, whatever that meant, and while the rational part of me had swallowed the fact of her death, the rest kept twitching like a decapitated snake. Someone else in the same state might have turned the house into a shrine, covered every wall and mantelpiece with photographs and memorabilia, put fresh flowers on her grave every day, and spent every night getting drunk watching old home movies. I didn't do that, I couldn't It would have been grotesque and utterly false, sentimentality had always made both of us ill. I kept a single photo We hadn't made home movies. I visited her grave once a year.

Yet for all of this outward restraint, inside my head my obsession with Amy's death simply kept on growing I didn't *want* it, I didn't *choose* it, I didn't feed it or encourage it in any way. I kept no electronic scrapbook of the trial If people raised the subject, I walked away. I buried myself in my work; in my spare time I read, or went to the movies, alone. I thought about searching for someone new, but I never did anything about it, always putting it off until that time in the indefinite future when I would be human again.

Every night, the details of the incident circled in my brain. I thought of a thousand things I "might have done" to have prevented her death, from not marrying her in the first place (we'd moved to Sydney because of my job) to magically arriving at the bank as her killer took aim, tackling him to the ground and beating him senseless, or worse. I knew these fantasies were futile and self-indulgent, but that knowledge was no cure. If I took sleeping pills, the whole thing simply shifted to the daylight hours, and I was literally unable to work. (The computers that help us are slightly less appalling every year, but air traffic controllers *can't* daydream.)

I had to do something.

Revenge? Revenge was for the morally retarded. Me, I'd signed petitions to the U.N., calling for the world-wide, unconditional abolition of capital punishment. I'd meant it then, and I still meant it. Taking human life was wrong; I'd believed that, passionately, since childhood. Maybe it started out as religious dogma, but when I grew up and shed all the ludicrous claptrap, the sanctity of life was one of the few beliefs I judged to be worth keeping. Aside from any pragmatic reasons, human consciousness had always seemed to me the most astonishing, miraculous, *sacred* thing in the universe. Blame my upbringing, blame my genes; I could no more devalue it than believe that one plus one equalled zero.

Tell some people you're a pacifist, and in ten seconds flat they'll invent a situation in which millions of people will die in unspeakable agony, and all your loved ones will be raped and tortured, if you don't blow someone's brains out. (There's always a contrived reason why you can't merely *wound* the omnipotent, genocidal madman.) The amusing thing is, they seem to hold you in even greater contempt when you admit that, yes, you'd do it, you'd kill under those conditions.

Anderson, however, clearly was not an omnipotent, genocidal madman. I had no idea whether or not he was likely to kill again. As for his capacity for reform, his

abused childhood, or the caring and compassionate alter ego that may have been hiding behind the facade of his brutal exterior, I really didn't give a shit, but nonetheless I was convinced that it would be wrong for me to kill him.

I bought the gun first. That was easy, and perfectly legal; perhaps the computers simply failed to correlate my permit application with the release of my wife's killer, or perhaps the link was detected, but judged irrelevant.

I joined a "sports" club full of people who spent three hours a week doing nothing but shooting at moving, human-shaped targets. A recreational activity, harmless as fencing; I practised saying that with a straight face.

Buying the anonymous ammunition from a fellow club member *was* illegal; bullets that vaporized on impact, leaving no ballistics evidence linking them to a specific weapon. I scanned the court records; the average sentence for possessing such things was a five-hundred dollar fine. The silencer was illegal, too; the penalties for ownership were similar.

Every night, I thought it through. Every night, I came to the same conclusion: despite my elaborate preparations, I wasn't going to kill anyone. Part of me wanted to, part of me didn't, but I knew perfectly well which was strongest. I'd spend the rest of my life dreaming about it, safe in the knowledge that no amount of hatred or grief or desperation would ever be enough to make me act against my nature.

I unwrapped the parcel. I was expecting a garish cover sneering body builder toting sub machine gun—but the packaging was unadorned, plain grey with no markings except for the product code, and the name of the distributor, Clockwork Orchard

I'd ordered the thing through an on-line catalogue, accessed via a coin-driven public terminal, and I'd specified collection by "Mark Carver" at a branch of the Implant Store in Chatswood, far from my home All of which was paranoid nonsense, since the implant was

legal—and all of which was perfectly reasonable, because I felt far more nervous and guilty about buying it than I did about buying the gun and ammunition.

The description in the catalogue had begun with the statement *Life is cheap!* then had waffled on for several lines in the same vein: *People are meat. They're nothing, they're worthless.* The exact words weren't important, though: they weren't a part of the implant itself. It wouldn't be a matter of a voice in my head, reciting some badly written spiel which I could choose to ridicule or ignore; nor would it be a kind of mental legislative decree, which I could evade by means of semantic quibbling. Axiomatic implants were derived from analysis of actual neural structures in real people's brains, they weren't based on the expression of the axioms in language. The spirit, not the letter, of the law would prevail.

I opened up the carton. There was an instruction leaflet, in seventeen languages. A programmer. An applicator. A pair of tweezers. Sealed in a plastic bubble labelled STERILE IF UNBROKEN, the implant itself. It looked like a tiny piece of gravel.

I had never used one before, but I'd seen it done a thousand times on holovision. You placed the thing in the programmer, "woke it up," and told it how long you wanted it to be active. The applicator was strictly for tyros; the jaded cognoscenti balanced the implant on the tip of their little finger, and daintily poked it up the nostril of their choice.

The implant burrowed into the brain, sent out a swarm of nanomachines to explore, and forge links with, the relevant neural systems, and then went into active mode for the predetermined time—anything from an hour to infinity—doing whatever it was designed to do Enabling multiple orgasms of the left kneecap. Making the colour blue taste like the long lost memory of mother's milk. Or, hard-wiring a premise: *I will succeed. I am happy in my job. There is life after death. Nobody died in Belsen. Four legs good, two legs bad . . .*

I packed everything back into the carton, put it in a drawer, took three sleeping pills, and went to bed.

Perhaps it was a matter of laziness. I've always been biased towards those options which spare me from facing the very same set of choices again in the future; it seems so *inefficient* to go through the same agonies of conscience more than once. To *not* use the implant would have meant having to reaffirm that decision, day after day, for the rest of my life.

Or perhaps I never really believed that the preposterous toy would work. Perhaps I hoped to prove that my convictions—unlike other people's—were engraved on some metaphysical tablet that hovered in a spiritual dimension unreachable by any mere machine.

Or perhaps I just wanted a moral alibi—a way to kill Anderson while still believing it was something that the *real* me could never have done.

At least I'm sure of one thing. I didn't do it for Amy.

I woke around dawn the next day, although I didn't need to get up at all; I was on annual leave for a month. I dressed, ate breakfast, then unpacked the implant again and carefully read the instructions.

With no great sense of occasion, I broke open the sterile bubble and, with the tweezers, dropped the speck into its cavity in the programmer.

The programmer said, "Do you speak English?" The voice reminded me of one of the control towers at work; deep but somehow genderless, businesslike without being crudely robotic—and yet, unmistakably inhuman.

"Yes."

"Do you want to program this implant?"

"Yes."

"Please specify the active period."

"Three days." Three days would be enough, surely; if not, I'd call the whole thing off.

"This implant is to remain active for three days after

insertion. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"This implant is ready for use. The time is seven forty-three a.m. Please insert the implant before eight forty-three a.m., or it will deactivate itself and reprogramming will be required. Please enjoy this product and dispose of the packaging thoughtfully."

I placed the implant in the applicator, then hesitated, but not for long. This wasn't the time to agonize; I'd agonized for months, and I was sick of it. Any more indecisiveness and I'd need to buy a second implant to convince me to use the first. I wasn't committing a crime; I wasn't even coming close to guaranteeing that I would commit one. Millions of people held the belief that human life was nothing special, but how many of them were murderers? The next three days would simply reveal how *I* reacted to that belief, and although the attitude would be hard-wired, the consequences were far from certain.

I put the applicator in my left nostril, and pushed the release button. There was a brief stinging sensation, nothing more.

I thought, *Amy would have despised me for this.* That shook me, but only for a moment. Amy was dead, which made her hypothetical feelings irrelevant. Nothing I did could hurt her now, and thinking any other way was crazy.

I tried to monitor the progress of the change, but that was a joke; you can't check your moral precepts by introspection every thirty seconds. After all, my assessment of myself as being unable to kill had been based on decades of observation (much of it probably out of date). What's more, that assessment, that self-image, had come to be as much a *cause* of my actions and attitudes as a reflection of them—and apart from the direct changes the implant was making to my brain, it was breaking that feedback loop by providing a rationalization for me to act in a way that I'd convinced myself was impossible.

After a while, I decided to get drunk, to distract myself

from the vision of microscopic robots crawling around in my skull. It was a big mistake; alcohol makes me paranoid. I don't recall much of what followed, except for catching sight of myself in the bathroom mirror, screaming, "HAL's breaking First Law! HAL's breaking First Law!" before vomiting copiously.

I woke just after midnight, on the bathroom floor. I took an anti-hangover pill, and in five minutes my headache and nausea were gone. I showered and put on fresh clothes. I'd bought a jacket especially for the occasion, with an inside pocket for the gun.

It was still impossible to tell if the thing had done anything to me that went beyond the placebo effect; I asked myself, out loud, "Is human life sacred? Is it wrong to kill?" but I couldn't concentrate on the question, and I found it hard to believe that I ever had in the past, the whole idea seemed obscure and difficult, like some esoteric mathematical theorem. The prospect of going ahead with my plans made my stomach churn, but that was simple fear, not moral outrage; the implant wasn't meant to make me brave, or calm, or resolute. I could have bought those qualities too, but that would have been cheating.

I'd had Anderson checked out by a private investigator. He worked every night but Sunday, as a bouncer in a Surry Hills nightclub; he lived nearby, and usually arrived home, on foot, at around four in the morning. I'd driven past his terrace house several times, I'd have no trouble finding it. He lived alone; he had a lover, but they always met at her place, in the afternoon or early evening.

I loaded the gun and put it in my jacket, then spent half an hour staring in the mirror, trying to decide if the bulge was visible. I wanted a drink, but I restrained myself. I switched on the radio and wandered through the house, trying to become less agitated. Perhaps taking a life was now no big deal to me, but I could still end up dead, or in prison, and the implant apparently hadn't rendered me uninterested in my own fate.

I left too early, and had to drive by a circuitous route to kill time; even then, it was only a quarter past three when I parked, a kilometre from Anderson's house. A few cars and taxis passed me as I walked the rest of the way, and I'm sure I was trying so hard to look at ease that my body language radiated guilt and paranoia—but no ordinary driver would have noticed or cared, and I didn't see a single patrol car.

When I reached the place, there was nowhere to hide—no gardens, no trees, no fences —but I'd known that in advance. I chose a house across the street, not quite opposite Anderson's, and sat on the front step. If the occupant appeared, I'd feign drunkenness and stagger away.

I sat and waited. It was a warm, still, ordinary night; the sky was clear, but grey and starless thanks to the lights of the city. I kept reminding myself: *You don't have to do this, you don't have to go through with it.* So why did I stay? The hope of being liberated from my sleepless nights? The idea was laughable; I had no doubt that if I killed Anderson, it would torture me as much as my helplessness over Amy's death.

Why did I stay? It was nothing to do with the implant; at most, that was neutralizing my qualms; it wasn't forcing me to *do* anything.

Why, then? In the end, I think I saw it as a matter of honesty. I had to accept the unpleasant fact that I honestly wanted to kill Anderson, and however much I had also been repelled by the notion, to be true to myself I had to do it—anything less would have been hypocrisy and self-deception.

At five to four, I heard footsteps echoing down the street. As I turned, I hoped it would be someone else, or that he would be with a friend, but it was him, and he was alone. I waited until he was as far from his front door as I was, then I started walking. He glanced my way briefly, then ignored me. I felt a shock of pure fear—I hadn't seen him in the flesh since the trial, and I'd forgotten how physically imposing he was.

I had to force myself to slow down, and even then I passed him sooner than I'd meant to. I was wearing light, rubber-soled shoes, he was in heavy boots, but when I crossed the street and did a U-turn towards him, I couldn't believe he couldn't hear my heartbeat, or smell the stench of my sweat. Metres from the door, just as I finished pulling out the gun, he looked over his shoulder with an expression of bland curiosity, as if he might have been expecting a dog or a piece of windblown litter. He turned around to face me, frowning. I just stood there, pointing the gun at him, unable to speak. Eventually he said, "What the fuck do you want? I've got two hundred dollars in my wallet. Back pocket."

I shook my head. "Unlock the front door, then put your hands on your head and kick it open. Don't try closing it on me."

He hesitated, then complied.

"Now walk in. Keep your hands on your head. Five steps, that's all. Count them out loud. I'll be right behind you."

I reached the light switch for the hall as he counted four, then I slammed the door behind me, and flinched at the sound. Anderson was right in front of me, and I suddenly felt trapped. The man was a vicious killer; I hadn't even thrown a punch since I was eight years old. Did I really believe the gun would protect me? With his hands on his head, the muscles of his arms and shoulders bulged against his shirt. I should have shot him right then, in the back of the head. This was an execution, not a duel; if I'd wanted some quaint idea of honour, I could have come without a gun and let him take me to pieces.

I said, "Turn left." Left was the living room. I followed him in, switched on the light. "Sit." I stood in the doorway, he sat in the room's only chair. For a moment, I felt dizzy and my vision seemed to tilt, but I don't think I moved, I don't think I sagged or swayed; if I had, he probably would have rushed me.

"What do you want?" he asked.

I had to give that a lot of thought. I'd fantasized this situation a thousand times, but I could no longer remember the details—although I did recall that I'd usually assumed that Anderson would recognize me, and start volunteering excuses and explanations straight away.

Finally, I said, "I want you to tell me why you killed my wife."

"I didn't kill your wife. Miller killed your wife."

I shook my head "That's not true. I *know*. The cops told me. Don't bother lying, because I *know*."

He stared at me blandly. I wanted to lose my temper and scream, but I had a feeling that, in spite of the gun, that would have been more comical than intimidating. I could have pistol-whipped him, but the truth is I was afraid to go near him.

So I shot him in the foot. He yelped and swore, then leant over to inspect the damage. "Fuck you!" he hissed. "Fuck you!" He rocked back and forth, holding his foot. "I'll break your fucking neck! I'll fucking kill you!" The wound bled a little through the hole in his boot, but it was nothing compared to the movies. I'd heard that the vaporizing ammunition had a cauterizing effect.

I said, "Tell me why you killed my wife."

He looked far more angry and disgusted than afraid, but he dropped his pretence of innocence. "It just happened," he said. "It was just one of those things that happens."

I shook my head, annoyed. "No. *Why?* Why did it happen?"

He moved as if to take off his boot, then thought better of it. "Things were going wrong. There was a time lock, there was hardly any cash, everything was just a big fuck-up. I didn't mean to do it. It just happened."

I shook my head again, unable to decide if he was a moron, or if he was stalling. "Don't tell me 'it just happened.' *Why* did it happen? Why did you do it?"

The frustration was mutual; he ran a hand through his hair and scowled at me. He was sweating now, but I

couldn't tell if it was from pain or from fear. "What do you want me to say? I lost my temper, all right? Things were going badly, and I lost my fucking temper, and there she was, all right?"

The dizziness struck me again, but this time it didn't subside. I understood now, he wasn't being obtuse, he was telling the entire truth. I'd smashed the occasional coffee cup during a tense situation at work. I'd even, to my shame, kicked our dog once, after a fight with Amy. Why? *I'd lost my temper; and there she was.*

I stared at Anderson, and felt myself grinning stupidly. It was all so clear now. I understood. I understood the absurdity of everything I'd ever felt for Amy — my "love", my "grief". It had all been a joke. She was meat, she was nothing. All the pain of the past five years evaporated; I was drunk with relief. I raised my arms and spun around slowly. Anderson leapt up and sprang towards me; I shot him in the chest until I ran out of bullets, then I knelt down beside him. He was dead.

I put the gun in my jacket. The barrel was warm. I remembered to use my handkerchief to open the front door. I half-expected to find a crowd outside, but of course the shots had been inaudible, and Anderson's threats and curses were not likely to have attracted attention.

A block from the house, a patrol car appeared around a corner. It slowed almost to a halt as it approached me. I kept my eyes straight ahead as it passed. I heard the engine idle. Then stop. I kept walking, waiting for a shouted command, thinking, if they search me and find the gun, I'll confess; there's no point in prolonging the agony.

The engine spluttered, revved noisily, and the car roared away.

Perhaps I'm *not* the number one most obvious suspect. I don't know what Anderson was involved in since he got out; maybe there are hundreds of other people who had

far better reasons for wanting him dead, and perhaps when the cops have finished with them, they'll get around to asking me what I was doing that night. A month seems an awfully long time, though. Anyone would think they didn't care.

The same teenagers as before are gathered around the entrance, and again the mere sight of me seems to disgust them. I wonder if the taste in fashion and music tattooed on their brains is set to fade in a year or two, or if they have sworn lifelong allegiance. It doesn't bear contemplating.

This time, I don't browse. I approach the sales counter without hesitation.

This time, I know exactly what I want.

What I want is what I felt that night: the unshakable conviction that Amy's death—let alone Anderson's—simply didn't matter, any more than the death of a fly or an amoeba, any more than breaking a coffee cup or kicking a dog.

My one mistake was thinking that the insight I gained would simply vanish when the implant cut out. It hasn't. It's been clouded with doubts and reservations, it's been undermined, to some degree, by my whole ridiculous panoply of beliefs and superstitions, but I can still recall the peace it gave me, I can still recall that flood of joy and relief, and *I want it back*. Not for three days; for the rest of my life.

Killing Anderson *wasn't* honest, it wasn't "being true to myself." Being true to myself would have meant living with all my contradictory urges, suffering the multitude of voices in my head, accepting confusion and doubt. It's too late for that now, having tasted the freedom of certainty, I find I can't live without it.

"How can I help you, sir?" The salesman smiles from the bottom of his heart.

Part of me, of course, still finds the prospect of what I am about to do totally repugnant.

No matter. That won't last.

THE COLOURS OF THE MASTERS

by Sean McMullen

I first heard Chopin perform the night that I had just been ordered to cancel my flight back to New York, along with the well earned vacation that was to have followed it. Paris was reminding me how much I disliked the place by treating me to a soaking, windswept drizzle as a taxi carried me to an address near the Parc Monceau. For the previous month I had been supervising the installation of some computerised sound processing equipment in our company's local office, and I was tired, lonely, and aching to be in a country where most of the people willingly spoke English.

It was still early in the evening as the cab pulled into the drive of a mansion that probably dated from the early Nineteenth Century. There was a long, open path from the driveway to the porch of the house: the rain intensified at that very moment. I paid the fare, took my bags and trudged down the gravel path, by now so despondent that I did not bother to avoid the puddles. Gerry Searle, my immediate superior in the company, met me at the door.

"I had a few nasty things to say to you until a minute ago, Gerry," I said as he took my dripping coat, "but just having someone to talk to in English makes me forgive you for quite a lot."

"Forgive me? For what?" There was no surprise in his voice.

"For giving me the Paris installation, instead of the one in Rome. You speak French, but my second language is Italian. My parents still live in Rome, I could have saved the company hotel bills. And did you know about the local autonomy dispute that's going on in the Paris office? The staff have boycotted speaking English and I spoke only twenty words of French until a month ago."

"Rico, I know how the situation is here, but I just had to get you to take over," he said, trying to seem earnest but unable to face me. "An important deal came up, a potential recording contract worth hundreds of millions. That's also why I asked you to delay your flight back to the States."

"Ordered me to delay my flight back. And why me? I'm one of the back room boys. The only time that I ever set eyes on the musicians we record is when they appear on television."

I sat down heavily on a teak and velvet parlour stool and wiped my face with a handkerchief. A servant appeared from behind me, spoke to Gerry briefly, then carried my bags off. A servant. The furnishings also confirmed that this was not only the house of someone rich, but someone whose family had been rich for a long time. Very nice, but what would they want with a computer analyst specialising in digital sound software?

"The recording has to be done in this house, Rico," Gerry explained as he beckoned me to follow him. "The musicians are very famous, but . . ."

"But?" I asked, making no attempt to get up.

"They are dead. The people who own this house are distant relations of mine, and when I visited them they—"

"They probably held a seance and conjured up Mozart's ghost, and you just happened to have a recording contract in your pocket!" I shouted, standing up and snatching my coat from the rack. "Send my bags after me. Company business, like hell! Bunch of whackos. Try to stop me and I'll go to another outfit—I've had offers."

"Please, Rico, I can explain."

"Good. Phone me in New York, but try to get the time

zones right or you'll get my answering machine."

I turned to the door, only to be confronted by a pair of elderly identical twins. The women would have been in their early seventies, and were dressed in smart grey suits and frilly white blouses.

"We have mechanical recordings of Frederic Chopin playing his own piano works," said the one on the right in confident English.

"We are not, ah, whackos," said the other, her voice and accent identical. "I am Claudine Vaud, and this is my sister Charlotte."

"We are very respectable. We do not even know how to hold a seance," Charlotte stated indignantly.

I was taken aback. "Edison got the prototype of his phonograph working in 1877," I replied. "Chopin died thirty years before that."

"Twenty eight years," Charlotte smugly corrected me.

"But an ancestor of ours invented a way to record sound—except that she could not play it back," continued Claudine.

"But she could play it back as colours—we think."

"But Gerald has a way to change light back into sound, except that he is having trouble analysing his digital signal."

"No, no, he was digitising his analog signal."

"You don't even know what an analog signal is—"

"Ladies, please!" Gerry interrupted them. "Mr Tosti is very tired, and has probably not had dinner. Could you tell the maid to prepare another place at the table, and we can explain the problem to him as we eat."

"All right, but you were not explaining it very well just now," said Charlotte as they left.

Gerry took me to the living room, where a coal fire was burning. The place was filled with Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century furniture, all tasteful, expensive and well maintained.

"Tang Dynasty," said Gerry as I examined a vase on the mantelpiece. "Everything in this house is genuine, Rico,

including the music. The family goes back to the old aristocracy."

"So you have a bit of blue blood yourself?"

"Oh no. The family connection comes from Katherine Searle, who arrived from the U.S. in the 1820s and later married the heir. My own branch of the family is descended from her brother, who stayed in Boston and ran a factory."

He pointed to a row of portraits on the wall to my left.

"That one on the end is Hiram Searle. He was born in Boston in 1765, and is responsible for the basic principle of the sound recording machine that you are about to see."

The artist had obviously taken some trouble to clean up his subject, but the dreamy, slightly scruffy appearance of the inventor showed through nevertheless.

"He was a great inventor, but had little business sense. Fortunately his wife was as sharp as a tack where money was concerned, and the family business did very well. When Katherine, the eldest daughter, showed musical talent, she was sent to Europe to get a better education. That's her, in the next painting."

Katherine Searle was a stunner, with black curly hair cascading down past her shoulders, a pale, thin face, and big dark eyes. She was seated at the keyboard of a forte-piano, and was half turned to face the artist.

"She used to write long letters home, and sent a lot of the latest sheet music. That was probably where the big family scandal started, because apart from being a good engineer, Hiram fancied himself as a musician too. Our old family diaries describe how he would play the latest keyboard music that Katherine had enclosed while his wife read the letters aloud to the rest of the family.

"In 1825 his wife died. His son was old enough to run the factory by then, but he could not control Hiram's obsession with Beethoven. He practically worshipped the man and his music, said that he embodied the spirit of the new century."

"In a way he did."

"Maybe, but anyway Katherine had a lot of contacts in the musical world by then, and wrote home about Beethoven's deafness in great detail. To Hiram it was the greatest tragedy imaginable. Here was a man who wrote music that was nothing short of divine, yet he could not hear it. He decided to invent a machine which would allow The Master to hear again."

"An amplifier!" I exclaimed. "But it can't be done without transistors or valves: ear trumpets don't help much."

"That's right, and Hiram Searle was a good enough inventor to know when to give up on a futile line of thought. He decided to build a machine that would let you see the music you were playing instead. That's it over there."

I had not given the grand piano in the corner much attention until now. From a large rosewood box mounted over the keyboard, a length of cloth-covered electric cord trailed away to a mains socket. A screen in the box faced the player.

Gerry explained that the original light source had been a Davey carbon arc-lamp driven by a voltaic pile—all fairly new technology in the America of the 1820s. The more modern filament bulb had been added when the mechanism was restored about a century later. He removed the cover, to reveal a complex system of fine rods and levers, all driven by thin metal diaphragms, and in turn moving a system of paper-thin mirrors and tiny lenses and prisms. Every moving part was mounted on jewel bearings. A frosted glass screen faced whoever was playing the piano.

"Of course this is a modern Steinway," said Gerry as he showed me the metal horns that picked up the sound and delivered it to the diaphragms. "The original forte-piano is away being restored."

"That is right," said Charlotte as the twins entered. "It was strung with gut originally, but then metal strings were put in. They damaged the bridge and buckled the soundboard."

"It was the greater tension, but they couldn't get the gut, you know," Claudine added. Gerry had already explained that you could tell the twins apart by remembering that Charlotte always spoke first, and that she was the technical expert, while Claudine was the musician.

I was given a demonstration of the pianospectrum, as Hiram Searle had named it. Claudine sat at the keyboard while Charlotte flicked a switch and adjusted some ivory dials. As Claudine began the Schubert Moment Musicale in F-minor, the faint coloured ripples on the screen from our voices became waves of alternating, blending colours, shaded according to the chords, and heightened in places by the melody. It was pleasing, and very relaxing to watch. After a time I looked at the movement of the mirrors and levers through the open access panel. How does one describe a device with no ancestors or descendants? It was all blurs and flashes, almost alien.

"The main innovation is the use of the metal diaphragm to change the sound waves into mechanical impulses," said Gerry. "Beams of white light from the source are split up by the prisms, then are re-directed by the mirrors and lenses, which are moved by the levers from the diaphragms."

"For the early Nineteenth Century it's sensational," I said sincerely. "What a pity he never got a chance to show it to Beethoven."

Uneasy silence followed my words. The twins looked to each other, and then to Gerry. He cleared his throat uneasily but said nothing.

"Oh why not tell him?" said Claudine, speaking first for a change. "It all happened nearly one hundred and sixty years ago."

"But what about poor Hiram's memory?" said Charlotte unhappily.

"If Gerald can turn those recordings into sound, the truth will have to be told."

"Very well," said Charlotte, sounding like a child

expecting a beating. "Gerald, would you be so kind?" He nodded.

"Hiram Searle died in Vienna in 1827, a few weeks after he had arrived with his pianospectrum," said Gerry as he walked to a bookcase on the other side of the room. He took down two thick, leather-bound volumes. "I have here the bound collection of his letters, and Katherine's diary for 1827. Hiram wrote to Beethoven and promised to demonstrate to him a machine that would defeat his deafness. Beethoven replied, and was very enthusiastic. The trouble was that he expected something that would allow him to hear again. Hiram had not been clear about what his invention did."

"He did not like it," said Charlotte.

"He was very disappointed," said Claudine.

"He used a four letter word."

"Except that it was in German, and was seven letters long."

"But in English it would have had four letters."

"But not in French."

"I'll just read Katherine's account of the demonstration," Gerry cut in hastily. I had begun to realise that the twins' dialogues with each other could last a long time under the right conditions. "The passage is not dated, but it is probably from the first week of January.

"'Yesterday's demonstration was the very worst of disasters. Herr Beethoven was very ill, being much troubled by a swelling of the abdomen. Father conveyed the pianospectrum mechanism to his residence at a very early hour of the morning, and we worked until noon to set up the machine on one of The Master's own pianos. The poor instrument was much out of tune, harshly voiced, and had five broken strings, all from The Master trying to beat an audible sound from it. It required a great deal of work from myself before its state could be called anything like well-tempered.

"'At last the mechanism and strings were as well adjusted as circumstances would permit. The Master

entered, smiling but walking slowly, and obviously in discomfort. Father introduced him to me, but of course he could hear nothing. He sat down at the keyboard and peered at the screen of the pianospectrum.

"'Father connected the voltaic pile to the lamp in the machine, then struck an arc between the carbon rods. The Master was puzzled by the fumes rising out of the little smokestack, and asked father what it was. Father shook his head and pointed to the keyboard: he shrugged, then began to play a few chords at random.

"'The pianospectrum displayed its colours on the screen perfectly, but this was obviously not what The Master had expected. He held his ear near the screen and played some more chords, then struck the box housing the delicate mechanism with his fist. Next he played the opening bars of the Albumblatt in A-minor, Fur Elise. Clearly the mechanism had been damaged by the blow, as no colours were displayed on the screen. He frowned, struck the box again, then began to swear at father, something about bouncing, I believe.

"'Now father scribbled a note, explaining that all that the machine could do was to translate sounds into colours. This sent The Master into as severe a rage as such a sick man could be capable of. He insulted father terribly, calling him an incompetent ass, then he hit the pianospectrum again, stamped out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

"'Father was close to tears as he unclamped the pianospectrum from the piano. Although I was furious with The Master at the time, I do acknowledge that he is a very sick man, and that father had not specified to him just what his machine would actually do. Today father has gone hunting in the woods to calm himself. I cannot imagine what game he expects to find in the middle of winter.'"

"The next entry is dated January 9," said Gerry, looking up for a moment.

"'Father has been found at last, dead In the opinion of

the searchers, he might have been carrying his rifle carelessly when he tripped over a fallen branch, causing it to fatally wound him. In view of his trouble with The Master, however, suicide seems more likely. The authorities were very reluctant to certify the death accidental. Although I knew him to be an expert with guns, I told them that he had always been careless with them, and had had many accidents. May God protect his soul and forgive me for the lie. It was all that I could do to protect his good name.'"

"Nine weeks later Beethoven was dead," said Charlotte.

"Hiram's death was eventually certified as accidental, but there was still a scandal," said Claudine.

"Katherine moved to Paris, and changed her name."

"But she was already secretly in love with young Count Vaud, so she married him and changed her name again."

"It would have caused another scandal if people knew he had married the daughter of a suicide, so she concealed her background."

"She could never play the piano in public after that. She was so good that she would have become famous."

"Newspaper people would have traced her true identity, written about her in gossip columns and drawn cruel cartoons."

"They would have said how could she be a good musician when Beethoven called her father an ass?"

"She became a patron of great musicians and composers instead."

"She invited them home for dinners and parties."

"They played for her in this very room."

"Liszt, Chopin, Clara Schumann, she knew them all."

"Sometimes she secretly recorded their playing with another machine. Even in her diaries she never explained why she kept the harmonoscribe hidden from everyone."

At that moment the dinner gong rang through the rooms of the mansion, and the twins led us away to the dining room. My head was spinning from the revelations of the past half hour, especially the pianospectrum. It was

a marvel of precision engineering, at least half a century before its time, but the step from this to the recording device was more marvellous still, I was to see.

Dinner would have been extremely formal had it not been for the circumstances. Gerry told me that he had begun the installation that I had been sent over to complete, and had decided to call in on the Vaud sisters and tell them that they were distant relations of his. This was on his second evening in Paris. He told them that he had been intrigued by Katherine Searle's apparent disappearance from the family correspondence after 1827, and after years of research had discovered who she had married. The twins were suspicious at first, but after deciding that Gerry was a decent young man, decided to tell him everything.

"Even after I saw the pianospectrum in action, I still thought it was great family history, but nothing more," he said between mouthfuls of food. "Then they showed me the harmonoscribe, and I knew that I had the find of the century, even without the playback machine."

"But what is the harmonoscribe?" I asked for perhaps the tenth time. "You say that it is meant to record music as colour, yet you haven't even described it."

"Rico, you just have to see it for yourself. Ladies, would you please excuse us? It's time we got to work on that setup in the parlour."

"By all means," said Charlotte. "We shall have the coffee sent there."

"And we shall come ourselves," added Claudine.

If I marvelled at the pianospectrum, I stared in disbelief at the harmonoscribe as we entered the parlour. Imagine a heavy mahogany spinning wheel with a circular, silvered glass disk clamped to it. Rising directly out of the base was a tracking arm driven by a worm gear mechanism, and mounted on the arm was a diaphragm to drive it. A long sound tube led away from the diaphragm to a metal horn that lay on the floor.

"We have set up a playback device of our own," began Gerry, but I stopped him.

"Wait, just slow down there. How does this thing record in the first place? There are no grooves on the disk."

"Not needed. The tracking mechanism moves the needle at the end of the arm as the disk turns, and it ends up tracing out a spiral path At the same time, sound waves travel down the tube from the funnel and cause the diaphragm to vibrate. This moves the arm, and hence the needle vibrates as it travels, scratching a record of the sound waves in the silvering."

"It is all driven by clockwork," said Charlotte as she entered.

"And she kept it in the next room when she was recording the playing of a musician," said Claudine, who was right behind her.

"A trusted servant set it in motion at the right signal from her. The sound tube went through the wall and was hidden by a curtain."

"But why keep it a secret?" I asked. "It's a great invention."

"She never gave the reason in her diaries, but it must be obvious," said Charlotte "Just imagine her showing the machine to, say, Wagner He would wonder where she got the idea, and knowledge of science. Soon he would start making enquiries about her past. That would never do."

"No, and if it was Wagner he would blackmail her for money."

"And sex."

"Nonsense She was too old by the time she met him"

"She met Franz Liszt about the same time, and he tried to seduce her It is in her diary"

"Liszt tried to seduce every woman he met."

"So did Wagner."

"Please! Ladies, I need to brief Rico on the technical problems we've been having," Gerry broke in.

His experiments had shown that the glass disks could hold a little over three minutes of recorded sound, and

Charlotte had kept the mechanism in perfect operating condition. The playback device had been lost at the time of Katherine's death. According to her notes and diaries, she had been experimenting with a device that would reproduce the music as a colour display, something like that of the pianospectrum. Because the layer of silvering on the glass was so thin it could never be expected to drive a playback needle that could generate sound.

Gerry had adapted a modern turntable to hold the glass disks, and was using a laser scanning head to trace the path of the scratches in the silvering. When he had first seen the disks he had realised that anything that was recorded in a systematic and orderly way could be scanned, digitised, and played back through a computer driven sound synthesiser. Thus is where I came in. The software in the synthesiser's micro had been designed to filter out and enhance faint signals from old grooved disks and cylinders, not a flat trace on silvered glass.

When I asked for a microscope to examine the trace on the glass plate, the twins produced a century-old brass model that might have been contemporary with Louis Pasteur. I measured and sketched the waveforms, then began to modify the software.

"The problem is in the buffer masks," I explained as I worked. "At present it interprets everything as anomalous waveforms because it thinks it's getting output from a conventional grooved phonograph disk."

Gerry hovered nervously behind me as I began to change the software. While quite at home with re-wiring and modifying even the most expensive hardware, he had a dread of tampering with working computer programs. He had fed the signal from the laser's pickup through a frequency analyser before it reached the micro. The most substantial part of the change was altering several dozen assembly language bit-masks that defined the characteristics of the waveforms being input. It was the sort of tedious work that I hated, so I entrusted it to Gerry -he was so frightened of software that he would be far

more meticulous than myself.

I had been working for over three hours without a break by then, and I sank into one of the large, comfortable armchairs as Charlotte poured my coffee into an eggshell china cup. For a while I stared at the mechanism that Katherine Searle had built so long ago. It was a magnificent achievement for its time, no less so than her father's pianospectrum.

"I wonder where she got the idea," I said aloud.

"Oh, we know that," said Charlotte. "She wrote it in her diary. She always kept a diary."

"The 1829 diary," said Claudine. "I'll fetch it at once."

"And the 1837 diary," Charlotte called after her. "That was the year that she got it working."

Claudine returned with the books and handed me one that was open for March 10, 1829. It was quite a long entry. Katherine had decided to repair the damage to the pianospectrum inflicted by Beethoven two years earlier. The part explaining how she got the idea for her recording machine was very explicit.

"'As I removed the lid from the box housing the levers and mirrors, I noticed that one of the levers had been knocked from its mounting, and had fallen against the worm gear of the clockwork regulator. This had caused the point to be dragged across the silvered surface of the large mirror that concentrated the light from the arc-lamp.

'The line was nearly straight for a short distance, then all fine waves and troughs, then straight again until the point reached the mirror's edge and stuck in the brass mounting. As a diaphragm had been attached to the other end of the lever, I concluded that it had been Herr Beethoven's playing that had caused the wavy line to be traced. It was there, on the surface of the mirror: the actual sounds he had produced, even though he was long dead.

'After examining the scratches with an enlarging glass, I spent the afternoon in thought. Could not these scratches be played back through the pianospectrum as colours?

The compositions of a great composer are immortal on paper, but the playing of a musician dies with the flesh. Perhaps these little scratches could be used to record performances forever. There may even be a way to change them back into sound, or at least colours. If only father were still alive. He had such a way with these problems.'"

"We still have that mirror," said Charlotte. "It is locked in a special case."

"There is a note inside, which reads 'This scratch is the playing of Herr van Beethoven, January 1829'," said Claudine.

"Here is the entry where she perfects the harmonoscribe," said Charlotte as she handed me the second diary. It was open at June 15, 1837.

"'I can now record short performances as scratches on a silvered disk,'" I read. "'There remains the problem of playing them back as either colours or sound, and sometimes I despair of ever finding a solution. I have tried using fine beams of coloured light, directed in layers, but this provides a representation of the sound's volume alone, not its pitch. One might be able to mount a battery of small coloured mirrors at the edge of a second disk, but I do not think that any watchmaker could fashion clockwork fine enough for this to work, and the image would be minute indeed. On the other hand, I know that my friend has a solution, and that I shall always be able to rely upon him.'"

"Who is this friend that she mentions?" I asked the twins. "Was he another inventor?"

"We do not know," said Charlotte.

"He is mentioned in the diaries from 1835 until the year that she died, but he is never identified," said Claudine.

"She died in 1875, you know."

"I think he was a secret lover."

"Nonsense. She mentions that it was always platonic in 1873."

"What about after that?"

"She was as old as we are."

"We could have affairs if we wished," Claudine concluded, turning to me. "What do you think, Mr Tosti?"

I said that I had no doubt of it, then retreated to the micro to check the waveform masks that Gerry had completed. He returned to correcting the alignment on the laser head and pickup while I ran the modified program through some tests. I was wearing a pair of headphones as I worked so that I could monitor the output port. The A440 tone sounded clearly as I selected it from among the computer's data sets, and likewise that of middle C. Now I tried to test out some chords, but instead I heard a loud, crackling hiss, overlaid by a regular knocking and some softer rattles.

At once I realised that Gerry had managed to accidentally rename an output label, and that I was listening to a live signal from the laser head. I had put my hands up to the headphones to remove them when I heard an unmistakable cough — the heavy, deepchested cough of a dangerous medical condition. A man's voice said "Scusi, Madame."

As the music began I had the impression that I was listening to a radio transmission from a very distant station — from another planet, even another star. Amid the background noise a violin played a dreamy little piece by Paganini. The player was very good, with a deft bow technique and an excellent sense of timing. The pianist followed the melody with discretion and sensitivity.

The instrument had to be a Stradivarius. I had learned the violin for several years, and had once been permitted to play one of the legendary instruments for a few minutes. I recognised the powerful G string and characteristic tone. The playing was excellent, the very finest that I have ever heard. Fear mingled with my admiration, an unreasoning fear that I did not understand. These people were deities of music, masterful and note perfect. Even if I practised for a lifetime I could never play like this: in fact nobody could surpass or even approach such playing.

The melody brightened into the major key as the piece ended. The man said "Merci, Madame," and she replied "Oh, Monsieur." The hissing and rattle continued for a while, then stopped with a loud pop.

"I'm sure the tracking mechanism is as well tuned as it can be," said Gerry. I noticed that my hands were still raised to take the headphones off.

"Run it over that disk again," I said, unplugging the jack to the headphones and flicking the switch to the speakers. Gerry and the twins were as absolutely still and silent as I was while the music played again.

"Number three. NP and KV, 1838," read Charlotte. "That will be Nicolo Paganini and Katherine Vaud, of course. He said 'scusi'. He was Italian."

"And he coughed. He was not very well," said Claudine. "He died two years after this was recorded. The theme is from Rossini's Mose. Paganini's variations on it were very popular last century."

"Paganini himself," I whispered in awe.

"It's worth millions!" exclaimed Gerry. "A recording by the greatest violin virtuoso ever, and he's not even around to argue about royalties."

Over the ensuing hours we carried dozens of boxes of the silvered disks up from the basement. It was as if a group of children had dug up a treasure chest at the beach, and were strutting about wearing priceless crowns, tiaras and necklaces before relinquishing it all to the adults. Katherine had secretly been recording the playing of her famous guests and proteges from the perfection of her harmonoscribe in 1837 until her death in 1875. Apart from the famous composers, there was quite a number of disks of famous virtuoso pianists of the early and middle Nineteenth Century. Singers and players of other instruments were on no more than five percent of the disks.

At first we played the disks of the most famous people. Clara Schumann's piano technique was flawlessly precise,

yet with a warm grace that I have heard in no modern performer. Franz Liszt, on the other hand, played with such sparkle and excitement that I felt wrung out at the end of each disk. Chopin was a disappointment to me. Although he would hold his own with the top five pianists in the world today, I felt that the brooding melancholy of his style was probably more appealing to the Nineteenth Century taste than ours.

As we played each disk, I made a tape recording –just in case someone dropped it later. At 4am, Charlotte opened a rare and old bottle of French Brandy, and we drank a toast to Katherine, Hiram, and the great musicians of the last century. We felt very close to them by then, as over the previous five hours we had heard snatches of their conversations, laughter, and occasional curses as well as their music.

"This will have to be marketed very carefully," Gerry told us. "and of course we will have to let scientists look over everything and test it for authenticity. I would estimate that your share would be about two hundred million over five years, ladies."

"Is that in francs?" asked Claudine.

"American dollars. The classical music market does not move as fast as that for pop music, but it is very big. Every music lover in the world will want at least one CD or record of selections from Katherine's glass disks."

"It is a lot of money, Gerald, and we are already rich enough," said Charlotte "You worked out how to play sound from the disks, which we could never have done You must have a share."

"Well, that's very kind of you, but the company will give me a big bonus."

"Nonsense, you must take the money," said Claudine. "And Mr Tosti as well. He did . . . whatever he did to repair the computer."

"And he appreciates fine music."

"And he said that we still look seductive."

The twins winked at me in unison and smiled. Gerry

gave me a puzzled glance as I blushed and hastily got up to put another glass disk on the turntable.

"I remember that English conductor telling me how seductive I was," continued Charlotte.

"That was in 1937," Claudine elaborated. "He seduced you, too."

"And you."

"Not until his next trip to Paris."

"He probably thought you were me."

"He did not. I was very careful to tell him."

While they continued to argue, Gerry left the room to phone our company's New York executives and tell them of our discovery. I had noticed that as we searched through the recordings for famous performers, we were weeding a large number of disks by Katherine herself into a separate pile.

It occurred to me that I had not yet heard her play alone. When she had been playing the accompaniment on the three Paganini disks, and during the duets with Brahms, she had given a very good account of herself. I selected a disk of her playing a piece from Robert Schumann's Woodland Scenes The Prophet Bird.

A professional concert pianist once told me that this piece is a nightmare to play properly, with its odd accents, timing, and variations of dynamics and texture. Katherine had either practised the piece a great deal, or was so good that no effort was evident at all. The twins noticed too, and stopped their bickering to listen.

"That is a new player, and a good one," declared Charlotte.

"No, it was Madame Katherine. I remember some of her style from the duet she played with Brahms," Claudine corrected her.

"We must hear more."

"Yes, put on another disk, if you please."

We played Katherine's disks for the next forty minutes, and slowly discovered that she was at least the equal of Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt. A researcher like Clynes

would say that she exploited the sentic forms of each piece to the fullest extent, so that the music was a strong emotional experience, rather than just entertainment. Months later a critic said that listening to her play the Chopin Etudes was like a firm yet gentle hand seizing one's heart while another stroked it.

I also discovered that she had modified the harmonoscribe in 1854, so that it could record for seven minutes continuously: this required me to drag Gerry away from the phone to adjust the tracking head to the double-density recordings.

While he tried to tell us how excited the folk in New York were at the prospect of releasing an album of Chopin playing Chopin, we tried to explain about how good Katherine's playing was. Whether she was outshining Liszt with his own showpiece compositions, or playing her own frothy but pleasant pieces, she had no peer, and we made our way through a selection of her disks until the clock struck 6 a.m., and the maid arrived to take our orders for breakfast.

"Will you be releasing only one album of her pieces?" asked Charlotte. "She has recorded enough for at least a dozen."

"We might get one of her recordings on the album of highlights of the collection, but she's an unknown, no matter how good she is," Gerry explained without concern.

"But she is so very good," insisted Charlotte.

"As good as the best of the great composers," added Claudine.

"And virtuosos."

"You don't understand the recording industry," said Gerry. "Most of the selling potential comes from name and reputation, not talent. And even talented players need expensive promotion campaigns, not to mention concert tours, media interviews, and all that. Katherine has been dead for over a century. We've never had to run a publicity campaign for a new, dead virtuoso before—it would be

very expensive to run, and it could be a flop. She can't be there to pose for photographers, sign autographs, and speak for herself."

"But she gave us all these recordings," I protested. "Don't you think we owe her something?"

"We owe her plenty, and she will get it—as the inventor of the first sound recording machine," said Gerry. "That's real recognition, after all. Just think, only people who know anything about classical music will have heard of Clara Schumann, but literally everybody knows that Edison invented the phonograph."

"Except that Katherine was first," said Charlotte frostily.

"Well, let's be fair," I said. "She could only record, not play back."

"She did have a playback machine!" exclaimed Claudine. "She was always writing about the one developed by her friend."

"Whose name we never learned," said Charlotte. "Why, the playback invention may be somewhere in Paris at this very moment. We could run advertisements, asking people to search their attics and offering a reward."

The maid entered and announced breakfast. Charlotte and Claudine stood up at once, but Gerry stayed in his chair, rubbing his bloodshot eyes.

"I need to put a few more disks on tape for Rico to take to New York this morning," he explained, and I gave a silent cheer. "I think I'll pass up breakfast."

"You will do no such thing," said Charlotte. "The maid will bring croissants and coffee to you in here."

I volunteered to stay and help, and we set about taping another half dozen disks that Katherine had made in her later years. The last disk of all was dated only three weeks before her death, and was titled "To My Friend".

"Looks like another of her compositions," said Gerry. "Put it on. We might be able to use it on the 'selections' album as well—you know, start with her accompanying Paganini and finish with her very last recording."

"Yes, the twins would be pleased if she was featured on two of the tracks," I said as I mounted the disk on the turntable.

The hiss, rattles, and knocking began as usual, but instead of playing the piano, the long dead Katherine spoke—and spoke to us personally!

"Monsieur, or Madame, or perhaps there is even a group of you—you are the friend in my diaries, the inventor who has always given me hope, the person who has allowed my music to live again," she began, her voice weak and her breath shallow. She was speaking in English as well, perhaps anticipating that her disks and devices would be given to the American branch of the family one day.

"My friend from the distant future, I hope that most of my glass disks have survived to entertain and enchant you. Although I could never play the music back myself, I have recorded the very best musicians who have visited me over the past four decades for the music lovers of the future. This fragment of my century's music is my gift to you, but I would ask a small favour in return

"During my lifetime, and for the most cruel of reasons, I was unable to perform on stage or become a celebrity. When misfortune was at its very worst, I chanced upon this method of recording, and realised that I could use it to preserve my playing, as photographic plates preserve a person's likeness. A scandal surrounds my father's death, a scandal that I could never allow to be linked with my dear husband's noble family. By your century, however, that scandal will be either forgotten or unimportant, as time always heals such wounds It will be safe for me to play in public.

"If you please, my friend, take your playback machine to the concert halls and let me play to audiences after so very long. I shall not disappoint them. My good colleague Frederic Chopin always said that I played with the touch of an angel, and surely his opinion is not to be ignored.

"My doctor tells me that I have less than a month to live

Bless you, my friend, for bringing my hands back to life. Bless you and goodbye, from Countess Vaud, and from Katherine Searle."

She concluded the recording with a Chopin nocturne, number 2 in E-flat Major, and you may blame it on my Mediterranean temperament if you like, but I found myself unable to hold back the tears. Gerry had been sitting on the edge of his chair while the disk played, but he slumped back and buried his face in his hands as the last chord faded into the background of hiss and rattles.

"So the friend was us," I said rather stupidly

He was silent for some time, then he said, "The company's going to have to gear itself up for a very unusual promotion campaign."

"For Katherine? Gerry, it's all very well to convince you and me, but what about the Board? They'll never put up the money."

"They will if we withhold the recordings by the famous composers. How about that! She was talking to me—well, us, at any rate. I think I need to make another phone call to New York."

Now, five years later, it seems amazing that we could have worried about people being interested in Katherine. My own share of the recording profits could pay for a 747 airliner, with plenty left over. The twins have founded a university named after her, and she has been praised by everyone from the President to radical feminist groups. Strangely enough, she has been classed as a great virtuoso of the Twentieth Century, because that is when her public career began. The recordings have also produced an explosion of scholarship on Nineteenth Century music, and on how its great composers intended their works to be played.

I could not have known all of that as the cab drove me away from the Vaud mansion later that morning, but I knew that the reel of tape that I held would cause a sensation in New York. The dawn was breaking as we drove down the Avenue Marceau and across the Seine on

the way to Orly Airport, and the sky had cleared during the night, leaving the city clean and gleaming. To my surprise, the cab driver was Canadian, and spoke English.

"The start of a beautiful day, eh?" he remarked. "Even in winter the Old Lady can be pleasant sometimes. On mornings like this I always think something marvellous will begin."

I agreed, smiling all the more because today what he said was true. Katherine had challenged Time and Death themselves with her silvered glass disks and clockwork machine, and just when it seemed that she was beaten, along came Rico Tosti and Gerry Searle with their laser pickup heads, digital analysers and computer programs. Tired and proud, like some minor hero in a great legend, I fancied that I was holding hands with the newly awakened Katherine.

REPORT ON THE SHADOW INDUSTRY

by Peter Carey

1.

My friend S. went to live in America ten years ago and I still have the letter he wrote me when he first arrived, wherein he describes the shadow factories that were springing up on the west coast and the effects they were having on that society. "You see people in dark glasses wandering around the supermarkets at 2 a.m. There are great boxes all along the aisles, some as expensive as fifty dollars but most of them only five There's always Muzak. It gives me the shits more than the shadows. The people don't look at one another. They come to browse through the boxes of shadows although the packets give no indication of what's inside. It really depresses me to think of people going out at two in the morning because they need to try their luck with a shadow. Last week I was in a supermarket near Topanga and I saw an old negro tear the end off a shadow box. He was arrested almost immediately."

A strange letter ten years ago but it accurately describes scenes that have since become common in this country. Yesterday I drove in from the airport past shadow factory after shadow factory, large faceless buildings gleaming in the sun, their secrets guarded by ex-policemen with alsatian dogs.

The shadow factories have huge chimneys that reach far into the sky, chimneys which billow forth smoke of different, brilliant colours. It is said by some of my more cynical friends that the smoke has nothing to do with any manufacturing process and is merely a trick, fake evidence that technological miracles are being performed within the factories. The popular belief is that the smoke sometimes contains the most powerful shadows of all, those that are too large and powerful to be packaged It is a common sight to see old women standing for hours outside the factories, staring into the smoke.

There are a few who say the smoke is dangerous because of carcinogenic chemicals used in the manufacture of shadows. Others argue that the shadow is a natural product and by its very nature chemically pure. They point to the advantages of the smoke: the beautifully coloured patterns in the clouds which serve as a reminder of the happiness to be obtained from a fully realized shadow. There may be some merit in this last argument, for on cloudy days the skies above our city are a wondrous sight, full of blues and vermilions and brilliant greens which pick out strange patterns and shapes in the clouds.

Others say that the clouds now contain the dreadful beauty of the apocalypse.

2.

The shadows are packaged in large, lavish boxes which are printed with abstract designs in many colours. The Bureau of Statistics reveals that the average householder spends 25 per cent of his income on these expensive goods and that this percentage increases as the income decreases.

There are those who say that the shadows are bad for people, promising an impossible happiness that can never be realized and thus detracting from the very real beauties of nature and life But there are others who argue that the shadows have always been with us in one form or another and that the packaged shadow is necessary for mental

health in an advanced technological society. There is, however, research to indicate that the high suicide rate in advanced countries is connected with the popularity of shadows and that there is a direct statistical correlation between shadow sales and suicide rates. This has been explained by those who hold that the shadows are merely mirrors to the soul and that the man who stares into a shadow box sees only himself, and what beauty he finds there is his own beauty and what despair he experiences is born of the poverty of his spirit.

3.

I visited my mother at Christmas. She lives alone with her dogs in a poor part of town. Knowing her weakness for shadows I brought her several of the more expensive varieties which she retired to examine in the privacy of the shadow room.

She stayed in the room for such a long time that I became worried and knocked on the door. She came out almost immediately. When I saw her face I knew the shadows had not been good ones.

"I'm sorry," I said, but she kissed me quickly and began to tell me about a neighbour who had won the lottery.

I myself know, only too well, the disappointments of shadow boxes for I also have a weakness in that direction. For me it is something of a guilty secret, something that would not be approved of by my clever friends.

I saw J. in the street. She teaches at the university.

"Ah-hah," she said knowingly, tapping the bulky parcel I had hidden under my coat. I know she will make capital of this discovery, a little piece of gossip to use at the dinner parties she is so fond of. Yet I suspect that she too has a weakness for shadows. She confessed as much to me some years ago during that strange misunderstanding she still likes to call "Our Affair". It was she who hinted at the feeling of emptiness, that awful despair that comes when one has failed to grasp the shadow.

4.

My own father left home because of something he had seen in a box of shadows. It wasn't an expensive box, either, quite the opposite—a little surprise my mother had bought with the money left over from her housekeeping. He opened it after dinner one Friday night and he was gone before I came down to breakfast on the Saturday. He left a note which my mother only showed me very recently. My father was not good with words and had trouble communicating what he had seen. "Words Cannot Express It What I feel Because of The Things I Saw In The Box Of Shadows You Bought Me."

5.

My own feelings about the shadows are ambivalent, to say the least. For here I have manufactured one more: elusive, unsatisfactory, hinting at greater beauties and more profound mysteries that exist somewhere before the beginning and somewhere after the end.

A WAY BACK

by Leanne Frahm

The air was sultry, enveloping Michael in a moist cocoon as he trudged up the footpath, humid with the promise of more rain. The haversack rubbed uncomfortably on his sweaty back. Thankfully, he rounded the hedge of wiry lantana and came into view of the old boardinghouse. It was a big, meandering house in the old Queensland tradition, reared on wooden stilts, an amiable incoherence of shady verandas and cool inside rooms.

Rosie sat on the top of the front flight of steps. "How was it? A good trip?" she said as he sat heavily beside her and wiped a sodden handkerchief across his face.

"It was okay," he said, and pulled the haversack off. He checked the lens cover on the camera for sand.

"It looks like rain again," said Rosie. "You were lucky not to get caught in the forest."

He nodded. "It's wet in there already. I lost a page of diagrams in the mud." He relaxed, gazing up into the golden glow of late afternoon.

"Mrs Camilleri saw a brontosaurus this morning," said Rosie, examining a fingernail.

Michael looked at her, trying to visualize their landlady confronting a dinosaur, and failed. "Really," he said finally. "Where?"

"In Mrs McGeever's backyard, down the road." She adopted a fair imitation of Mrs Camilleri's accent and

waved her hands expressively. "'One of those big things they're talking about to the papers—you know, a what-you-call-it a brontolizard.' She was a bit vague, though. It could have been a diplodocus or an apatosaurus They're all the same to a newspaper."

Michael laughed quietly. "Well, if anyone's going to see one around here, she is." He sat for a moment, enjoying a slight breeze. "You've suddenly become an expert," he said.

"School," said Rosie briefly, her nose wrinkling in the customary teacher's grimace. "I thought we could use the news items as a project, learn what dinosaurs were really like. The kids are collecting pictures and things . . ." She stopped and gazed out at the eastern sky. The glow was fading as rain scuds beetled in from the Pacific, intent on capturing the sun before it set.

"She said it was big and gray and foggy," she offered at last.

"What was?" Chris had come out onto the veranda behind them "Not Mrs Camilleri's dinosaur again? Honestly, if she wasn't such a good cook I'd board somewhere else. She's been following me around the house telling me about it ever since I got home from the mill. I wish she'd just get dinner on I'm starving."

"Mrs Camilleri sees a dinosaur, and all you can think about is your stomach?" asked Rosie.

Chris squatted down behind them. "You sound as if you believe her." He shook his head. "Look, a tribe in New Guinea sees dinosaurs. A village in Colombia sees dinosaurs. Suddenly every man and his dog are seeing dinosaurs. It's a respectable change from flying saucers, that's all. Right, Mike?"

Michael grunted, at both the statement and the contraction. He tried not to get involved in Chris and Rosie's eternal squabbling, and he disliked being called Mike, but both facts were as usual ignored by his two fellow boarders. Rosie leaped at the bait and turned to face Chris squarely.

"Mrs Camilleri was pretty sure," she said doggedly.

"But," said Chris, "they're not even *real* dinosaurs. Real ones I could get very interested in. These things are just ghosts no roarings or thrashing around or tearing down trees. Just illusions."

Michael was watching the rain now. It spread in a curtain, moving toward them from the sea A distant susurration grew to a steady roar as it moved across the iron roofs toward them.

"Here it comes," he said, standing up and hefting his haversack. Rosie grasped the rail and pulled herself to her feet.

"Damn!" she exclaimed. "My washing's on the line."

"Maybe Mrs Camilleri collected it in between spying on brontolizards over the back fence," Chris called after her.

Outside the window, palm fronds lashed in a frenzy, twisting and clattering, as the downpour continued. Farther off, the stolid mango trees stood engulfed in mud, dark green, almost black, against the lowering sky. It had rained steadily all night.

Michael sat cross-legged on the polished wooden floorboards, studying the chessboard. Chris lounged opposite him. Absently, Michael noticed Rosie come into the room and lean against the window of the communal lounge, tapping her fingers on the sill.

"I know this is the tropics," she said abruptly, "but this is ridiculous. It's supposed to be winter."

Michael frowned at her. Chris murmured "Umm" without moving his lips. The ticking of Mrs Camilleri's prized wall clock was loud against the drumming on the roof.

"And it's still so warm," Rosie continued. "Anyone want to go for a walk in the rain?"

Michael noticed the vexation in her voice. He glanced across at the window, where the drops beat furiously against the pane.

"Uh-uh," he said. He watched Chris's hand hesitate over a bishop.

Her footsteps sounded brisk and determined as Rosie came over to stand above them. "Are you both going to sit around all day? It's Saturday, you know. Schoolteachers and sugar chemists and even holidaying geologists have days off occasionally."

Chris winced and clutched at his head. "I almost had it then," he complained at her. "You've made me forget it What's the matter with you, anyway? It's pouring out there!"

Rosie bounced on her toes "I just don't like being cooped up," she said.

"Shush," said Michael irately.

"Jesus," she muttered.

Michael watched as she wandered back to the window and resumed her scowling at the dripping trees. He turned his attention to the board. Chris picked up the bishop confidently and grinned at him.

A scream tore the warm quiet of the house. Michael jerked upright, stunned for a moment into immobility. Chris dropped the piece and sat up. The scream came again, ending in a crying wail.

"It's Mrs Camilleri," said Chris, springing up. "Where is she?" He ran to the door.

Rosie had not moved. She still stood, staring out into the rain-soaked sky. "She's in the kitchen," she whispered. "Facing the backyard. Look."

Michael glanced at Chris, uncertainly. He hurried to the window, Chris following.

Above the mango trees, a head towered, a duller green against the gray sky. It was indistinct through the rain, its outline hazy. Its eyes were mere caverns of further darkness, its mouth a black slit. Reptilian and huge, it swung back and forth as they watched Then it was gone, and the curtain of rain swept in again.

The rain had stopped at last, but again, no winter chill had followed it. The morning was already hot and humid Rosie sat silently, gazing across at Michael now and then.

He sat abstractedly, fidgeting his way through breakfast, only partially aware of Rosie's glances.

Only Chris seemed comfortable. He read the local paper, scattering it with bread crumbs.

"Don't do that," said Rosie. "We haven't read it yet. And don't leave it folded out of order."

Chris nodded amicably.

"Are you going out today?" Rosie asked abruptly.

Michael realized the question was meant for him. He nodded.

"Do you think you should?" she persisted.

"There's very little left to do," he replied "The measurements are nearly finished. I'd like to have it all done in case the rain starts in again."

Chris cut in. "Look, there's no danger anyway. What's it matter if he does go into the rain forest?" He clutched his hand to his heart. "*I'm* going to the mill Don't you care about me?"

"How brave," she snapped, and softened immediately. "I'm sorry, but there might be, well, *more* of them in the forest, that's all."

"And about as dangerous as a mirage," said Chris, unperturbed. "You're more likely to be trampled by the CSIRO mob than by a dinosaur."

Even Rosie had to laugh at that, and Michael grinned. It hardly seemed to him that only a week had passed, and what had been dismissed as hysterical ravings had assumed the respectability of fact as sighting followed verified sighting, and an influx of scientists of various disciplines converged on the coastal towns.

The inhabitants felt themselves to be happily aloof from the proceedings. From the initial reaction of panic at the persistent reports, they had developed a perverse pride in their dinosaurs -once it was established that the reptiles were, despite their fearsome looks, as insubstantial as a projected image.

"Them scientists," Michael heard more than once at the pub, "ain't got a clue. Just wait and see." Everyone waited,

but nothing new was forthcoming.

Chris read on. "It says here that the phenomenon is becoming more and more widespread in tropical countries."

"Thanks," said Rosie.

"Any new theories?" asked Michael. He toyed with a strip of egg white, meticulously painting it with yolk.

Mrs Camilleri pushed through the kitchen door with the tea in time to hear his words. "Theories, hah!" she said, her face drawn into lines of righteous disgust. "I got the only theory *I* need," and she clutched the silver-and ruby crucifix anchored firmly around her solid neck.

Chris grinned up at her.

"Never mind your laughing," she said, thumping the teapot on the table. The fears of her first sightings had been replaced by a healthy indignation that the orderings of her cosmos had gone temporarily astray, and that scientists were not the tools to mend them with, a fact which she never hesitated to impart to her boarders.

"They don't know what's going on, and until they do . . ." She stalked out, leaving her words hanging like a flaming sword of warning behind her.

"Well, her guess is as good as anyone's," remarked Rosie.

"The paper doesn't say much, either," said Chris. "Just that they're there. 'A spokesman for the Minister of Science said that however alarming the phenomenon'—good word, that; they use it a lot—'there is no cause for alarm, as these sightings have proved to be completely insubstantial and pose no threat to life or property at this moment . . .'"

"'At this moment,'" agreed Rosie

"He's a politician He has to cover himself," said Chris agreeably. He turned a few pages. "Then there are a few funny stories –one about a family who were eating dinner when a stegosaurus walked right through one wall and out the other." He laughed, but choked it off quickly as Rosie glared at him. "Sorry," he said.

"I don't think it's funny," she said. "I don't like it. It's . . . well, *silly*." She faced Michael. "Do you like it?" she asked.

"Like what?" he said, closing a note pad. "I'm sorry, I wasn't listening very closely."

"It doesn't matter," said Rosie. Michael lapsed back into his reverie.

"Hey, listen to this," Chris went on. "They're running a competition. Send in your funniest dinosaur story. The best five entries will win—"

"Stop it!" Rosie cried Michael frowned at Chris, who looked nonplussed.

"Sorry, Rosie. I didn't think," he said. "I mean, you shouldn't be frightened. Whatever they are, they're here. We just have to make the best of it."

"Why should I?" said Rosie, her handkerchief under her nose.

Michael put down his fork and began packing his haversack. "What else can you do?" he said.

The ledge of ancient granite cut a gash through the forest that even the lush foliage couldn't hide, despite centuries spent in the attempt.

Punka palms grew thinly at impossible angles from small crevices, and elkshorn arched from leaf mould filled depressions. Lantana and deadly moonlight wove doggedly in from the edges, but the full expanse of the rock defeated them Only splashes of dull green and yellow fungi discoloured it. It curled like a mighty comber, transplanted and frozen forever in the perpetual twilight of the rainforest. Beneath its crest, sheltering it, a long deep cavern had been ground out by some ancient convulsion, high above the forest floor.

Michael stood at the bottom of the wall, craning up at the cave. Birds sounded complex broken chords above him, invisible in the canopy. It was a long hike from the bus stop at the edge of the town, where the cane fields gave way abruptly to the forest. He rested for a moment, anticipating today's finish to his work.

It had been a tiring but exhilarating holiday for him, one he had promised himself through the last year at the university. He had majored as a geologist, but before starting work with an oil company, he had indulged himself with three months of exploration in the shrinking rain forests of northern Queensland. And he had found more than he had hoped for.

He climbed up over vines and roots into the arch of the rock. Here were the prizes which he had discovered and over which he had laboured for so long—diagramming, photographing, taking notes—an unknown gallery of aboriginal cave paintings, clear and perfect under their cover of rock. Unknown, until the time when Michael would release their location to the government. And then, when the hikers and vandals and picnickers started arriving, Michael would have at least the satisfaction of having preserved their antique uniqueness on paper.

But his thoughts were less with his task today than they had been with the mystery of the dinosaurs. On the trek in, he had found himself glancing around with more than usual alertness. He had not looked down for snakes, but up, between the encircling trees, for a glimpse of a ghostly gray form. He had seen none, and was vaguely disappointed.

He worked methodically on the last portion, a later addition, a small projection plastered crazily with hand prints, but his work seemed to lack conviction. Somehow the attraction of events thousands of years before had palled. a tribe from millions of years ago had taken precedence. For the first time he felt almost exasperated with the slow routine of it all.

He wound a plumb line around a spur of rock and measured the distance to the sandy floor, hastily and inexactly. As he did so, it came to him with utter conviction that behind him, time was in chaos. He dropped the tape and turned.

Directly in front of him, a dinosaur had appeared. The level of the rock above the forest floor was such that the

beast's head was on a level with his. Instinctively, he started farther back into the protective rock, then remembered the harmlessness of the image. He walked slowly forward, to stand on the edge of the cavern.

The dinosaur—a meat eater, he was sure, perhaps the dreaded tyrannosaurus—gave no sign that it saw him, although its right eye was fixed somewhat to his left. The eye itself was huge and moist, jet-black except for a circle of yellow light in the center.

Michael looked at the mouth, half open as if it were panting. He glimpsed in its dimness the white of stained conical teeth, and shuddered.

The skin was thick and rough-looking, almost like that of a shark, patched in places with ugly scars and the weeping sores of parasites. The colour was of a muddy brown, shading into dull cream on the belly. A streak of yellow ran from its jaw down its flank. In the gloom, he could just make out the colour continuing to the end of the thick blunt tail.

For a moment, a wild elation transfixed him, as he realized that he was seeing this apparition more clearly than any other. Then the discipline of his training exerted itself.

He moved to pick up his camera, and suddenly he was aware that the eye was no longer looking through the rock but was focused on him. It blinked a slow membranous lid, and the huge body seemed to change stance slightly, become more compact. The mouth opened.

Michael found himself cowering at the back of the cavern, crouching in the sand, and knew that through his awful terror, the mouth had snapped at him, not at some creature in its own dimension, but at him. He knew he had screamed as the teeth passed through his shoulder. The pain was almost real.

And the dinosaur was gone.

He sat for a while, reassembling his scattered wits. He tried to convince himself that the lunge at him was a mere coincidence, but the implacable certainty of the speckled

eye left him confused and unsure. Finally, his hands still shaking, he picked up his paraphernalia and loaded his haversack. It was a long walk back to the road, and he kept his eyes up all the way.

Rosie smiled at Michael as he waited beside the school fence, but her features were drawn. "I thought I'd walk you home," he said. She smiled again.

"But weren't you supposed to go this morning—now that you've finished? Your job starts soon. . . ."

"I changed my mind," he said.

She nodded, accepting the fact but refusing to comment on the implication.

"They say there's never been a winter like it," he said conversationally as they scuffed along the path. Despite his absorption, Rosie's unhappiness bothered him. Even after the episode in the forest, which he felt within himself to be a turning point to some unspecified goal, he could not feel the fears she obviously did, but he accepted her consequent and unconscious accusations quietly, and felt a commitment to restore her humour.

"It's right around the world," he went on as they skirted an overflowing drain. "Even some deserts have had more rain than they've had for ten years. The West's awash — well, awash for them, I suppose. Now the graziers are complaining about the cattle drowning instead of starving."

Rosie stopped for a moment. Water ran off her umbrella in a steady stream as she tried to prize a lump of mud off her boot.

"Do you think it'll go away?" she asked.

"The rain—"

"No. You know."

Michael shrugged. Sweat prickled under his raincoat. "We'll just have to wait and see," he said.

"But that's just it; everyone's waiting. Why don't they *do* something?" Tendrils of hair lay in damp strands against her cheek. Michael examined his own boots, unable to

think of the clearly comforting answer she needed.

She swung ahead. "I just have this feeling. It's . . ." She jerked convulsively as a small reptilian form ran bobbing across the road ahead of them. It ran erect, rain washing through its pumping haunches.

"Come on," said Michael after a pause. She placed her satchel more securely under her arm.

"How are the children taking it?" he asked.

"Oh, fine," said Rosie with a trace of bitterness. "They think it's great fun—see how many specimens they can list. But most mothers are walking them to school now." She was silent for a moment. Then she burst out, "Oh, Mike, I hate it!" She clutched at her satchel, but the rain-soaked leather slipped through her grasp. He bent and picked it up, wiping ineffectually at the mud, and gave it back to her. Her hands were shaking.

He took her arm, and they went on silently through the rain. Behind them, a flying lizard swooped through a frangipani branch and went out of sight between the trees. The frangipani shivered slightly, and one cream-and-yellow blossom drifted slowly down to lie in the red mud.

"Good morning, Mrs Camilleri," Michael said, coming through the gate. "The sun's nice, isn't it?"

Mrs Camilleri crouched by a bedraggled flower bed and grunted a reply. She sat back on her knees and wiped her face under its big red sun hat with her apron.

"Just don't know," she said. "It musta be all that rain. The weeds are more tougher than ever."

"Let me try," said Michael. He bent over. The sun's heat drew the water vapour out of the soil in waves of drenching humidity. Breathing seemed harder down there.

He grasped a thorny weed, digging his hand down around the root to avoid the sharp prickles, and pulled. His hand slipped off. He wiped the sweat from his hands on his jeans and tried again. There was little resistance but his hand seemed to come away easily. He sucked a small pinprick on his finger.

"You're right, Mrs Camilleri," he said thoughtfully. "The rain must have encuraged the taproots to grow longer than usual." He got up.

"And the garden shears are no good. I can't make them work—musta got rusted. Ah, leave it for now." Mrs Camilleri fanned herself. "It's too hot for that. And it looks like more rain anyway." The first few drops fell as the sun disappeared.

"Mother of God, that quick?" muttered Mrs Camilleri with a reproachful eye on the line full of sheets, and ran heavily to take them in.

Michael walked slowly to the steps. He reached out with one hand to grip the wooden railing, hesitated, and flexed his fingers. He studied the railing for a moment, then shrugged. He walked briskly up the stairs, his hands in his pockets.

"Don't you think they're getting clearer? More solid, I mean," said Rosie. The three of them sat at the dining table, eating Mrs Camilleri's lamb-and-vegetable stew. Michael had watched the old woman carefully carry each steaming bowl to the table, cradling it with both hands. She had forgotten her potholder.

"Think so?" said Chris in a desultory tone. Michael had noticed that even Chris seemed to have lost interest in arguing. It wasn't surprising. There didn't seem to be anything new to say about the dinosaurs, whose shadowy lives now seemed irrevocably entangled with theirs. The effect of the rain on next year's sugar crop was more important to Chris.

"Yes, I do think so," said Rosie belligerently.

No one answered. She went on, her voice quieter. "I saw one today in the schoolyard. It was raining—and I thought I could see the rain running off its back."

Her tone of voice penetrated Michael's introspection, and he realized how close she was to breaking.

Chris speared a chunk of meat. "Maybe it's raining wherever it is, and that's its own rain," he said helpfully.

Michael roused himself to agree. "That's right. There's bound to be rain wherever they are."

"I know the latest theory is that we're seeing glimpses of a different time sequence"—Rosie's voice was tight—"but no one's bothered to explain how or why it's happening. I still say they're getting closer!"

"Closer?" asked Chris.

"To us, to you, to me. . . ." She subsided. Michael saw that it cost her an effort. There was silence for a while.

"Did Mrs Camilleri forget to salt this?" asked Chris, reaching for the cellar.

"It's very bland," agreed Michael.

Rosie sat by a lamp in the lounge, reading. At least Michael thought she was reading. Every so often she would lift her head to stare at the ornate light fixture above her. She turned the pages of the magazine slowly with one hand, while the other slid back and forth on the smooth fabric. A comforting gesture, Michael thought.

Chris came in from the kitchen where he'd been helping Mrs Camilleri wash the dinner things. Michael had heard several crashes and the occasional clatter of cutlery, and Mrs Camilleri's consequent scolding, but he said nothing. Oddly enough, neither did Chris. He stood by the window, frowning, his hands on his hips.

Michael felt he must break the silence.

"Would anyone like some music?" he said.

"The speaker's not working very well," said Chris. "I tried it this afternoon. It sounded funny."

"Still . . ." Michael trailed off.

"What about chess?" said Chris abruptly.

"All right," Michael agreed.

They sat either side of the board, where the plastic pieces glinted in the yellowish light.

Michael watched Chris make his first move. His fingers fumbled and the pawn slipped, rattling a knight and a bishop. Chris frowned again. "Sorry," he said. He picked up the piece, hooking his fingers under it, and placed it on a square.

Suddenly Michael could not face playing chess, moving the pieces. He could not face the careful movements of the magazine pages.

"I guess I just don't feel like chess tonight," he said, standing up. "I think I'll have an early night."

Chris looked up in surprise. Rosie ignored him. Michael smiled at them both briefly and walked firmly to his room.

He sat in a chair by the window.

"Michael?" The whisper came from beyond his door. "Can I come in?"

"Yes," he said.

Rosie was silhouetted against the hall light. She reached for the light switch.

"No, leave it off," he said. "Come and look."

She went over to him, to where a faint reflection of the streetlights washed his face. She looked out.

Directly under a light, a crouching beast slavered over its prey, tearing mouthfuls of flesh from the flank. Its jaws worked while it gazed back and forth, the golden motes in its eyes glistening. Its small, comically dainty paws rested on the herbivore's belly. Rain drummed on its hide

"God, that's horrible!" said Rosie, turning away. "And to think we have to live with that!"

An immense irritation washed through Michael.

"Not yet," he said harshly. "Maybe never"

"What do you mean?" The light showed her eyes white and wide, and he knew she was trembling. He didn't answer. She grasped the back of his chair to steady herself, but her hand slipped, and she stumbled forward. She drew a deep breath, and rubbed her hands together.

"You've noticed that, too," he said.

With a whimper, she whirled and ran out of the room, slamming at the door which shut with a gentle click. Michael turned back to the scene below.

The carnivore started to its hindlegs, nostrils questing. Far off, Michael fancied that he could hear a challenging peremptory bellow.

"So you're going?" asked Michael. He felt uninvolved, mouthing the words to be polite. He slouched in a lounge chair, refusing to take his eyes from the window and the fascinating world outside. The rain poured as heavily and as monotonously as ever, but the sound on the roof was deadened now.

Rosie nodded. Chris still looked anxious. "Are you sure you won't come, Mike?" he asked.

Michael shook his head slightly.

"Everyone's going. . . . Mrs Camilleri took off last night for her sister's in Melbourne."

"No," said Michael.

"You're a fool!" flashed Rosie. "One of those things *bit* that boy!"

"It didn't hurt him, though," Michael pointed out mildly.

"But they're getting realler. Next time it will—"

"No." Michael shook his head again and smiled. "We've passed each other." He ran his hand down the arm of the chair, feeling only the faintest tremor of tactile sensation, as if his hand were asleep.

"They're only in the tropics so far," offered Chris. "We're going south. They might be only temporary, and we can come back. . . ."

Michael looked at him, amazed that he could be so obtuse. "We *are* going back," he said patiently.

Rosie choked on an angry sob. "Don't listen to him, Chris. He's crazy. Come on."

Michael noticed how tightly they held their suitcases, their knuckles white with strain—how firmly they planted their feet wide apart on the floor.

Chris gave one more apologetic smile. "See you, Mike," he said, and he followed Rosie to the door. He had to put down the suitcase and grasp the knob with both hands to open it. The dull wooden stairs led down into the dimmer day. He left the door open.

Michael returned to the window. Already the rain forest seemed to have encroached into the yards around him, driven by the unceasing hot rain. Small reptiles ran under

the hibiscus hedges and through tunnels of bougainvillea. A long-necked lizard browsed, making pulling motions at a pandanus, but not yet quite grasping it.

Its rain spangled hide was duller today, he saw, its outline losing its edge. He felt regret, to be losing them so quickly.

His gaze strayed to the window frame, and up the papered wall beside it. They, too, were blurring slightly. The once-florid roses were becoming faded.

He stood abruptly, and walked carefully to the doorway. The house was no place to cower in, he decided. It belonged to the dinosaurs now, Mrs Camilleri's roses and all. The thought amused him. The clean timbers of the treads were fuzzy, but he suddenly felt very reckless, and bounded down the stairs into the garden and the rain. He stumbled on the path, and a hibiscus slid wetly from his fumbling grasp. That, too, amused him, and he strode over to the lizard and the pandanus.

He grinned up at it, reaching out to pound its mottled paunch. The skin twitched, like a fly-bitten horse's hide, and for a moment he thought its eyeball swiveled loosely in its socket to stare at him. He saluted it buoyantly and set off down the street.

The rain-drenched houses were all closed, he realized. The last bus must have left. It was a moot point whether it would make the flood plains farther south. He allowed himself one instant of regret that Rosie had not stayed with him and pulled his coat tighter. He still felt the rain. But whose rain? he wondered. Theirs or ours? This time his smile was wry and his eyes were shadowed.

The cane fields at the end of the town were churned into a red, waterlogged mire. He sat gingerly on an insubstantial rock, looking out over them. The adrenaline had ceased to flow, and he felt tired.

The dinosaurs were thicker here; it must suit them, he reflected. Herds of small ones browsed through the broken stalks. In the middle distance he could see what must surely be the true Brontosaurus. Its size awed him.

And overhead a gigantic glider circled; the hawks and kites were gone. They all species—were comfortable here now.

He suddenly felt very old, as old as the resurrected reptiles had been. He sat for a long time, huddled in his coat, watching, until the darker gloom of night closed in. He wondered how the dinosaurs had returned. He wondered where they had been, and where he was going. But most of all, he wondered if humanity would be given a second chance, too.

SHATTERWRACK AT BREAKLIGHT

by Terry Dowling

There are dust-devils at Twilight Beach. You can see them at sunset when the hot winds from the desert meet the cool ocean breezes, especially along the Promenade and terraces of the Gaza Hotel and down in the streets of the town.

They sometimes spin their playful dance in among the guests, much to the annoyance of the players of fire-chess. There is a rule that the vagaries of wind and weather are fair contest, and many a world-famous player has cried out in dismay during a crucial move when a queen or knight has had its small flame suddenly extinguished by a devil slipping in unnoticed amid the tables.

Some players even employ Devil Catchers rather than risk this happening, liveried or tuxedoed youths who stand about holding long handled spoilers, watching and waiting.

I can remember once Alexander Carlos staring down dumbfounded at his debased queen on just such an occasion, as if unable to comprehend what had happened. Then he had leapt to his feet and in a rage had gone racing along the terrace after the little funnel of air, beating at it with his fists, rushing through it back and forth, literally tearing it apart.

Player's temperament aside, Carlos gained himself a new reputation that evening. Xerxes may have whipped

the Hellespont for sinking his bridge of ships, but Alexander Carlos had murdered his dust-devil at Twilight Beach.

The dust-devils come at twilight, as we sand-ship sailors do. The devils, the sailors, and as if enjoying the risk and tempting fate—the players of fire-chess. I had left Rim at Trimori's and had decided on a walk down through the town, along the streets leading away from the Gaza and the ocean.

Those streets were quiet and refreshingly cool. The little intersections were set with lanterns that swayed and flickered in the breeze, and now and then in the wash of warm light under those yellow paper cages I could see a devil leap up to dance and die or spin off about its mischief.

You can't watch those devils too long. They make a philosopher out of you. All that sudden giddy vitality. Like watching a butterfly going past, desperate to be anywhere.

No sooner had I received my coffee at my usual table at Sailmaker's than breaklight was on the town. The sun had gone down, there was the brief time of stillness, then up came the sudden flood of golden light.

If one thing can be said to govern life in Twilight Beach, that is it. Tourists and locals alike set their day by it. How must I order my affairs to be back at the Gaza for the breaklight?

All around me people sat rapt, or came out on their balconies to watch. Then, when it was fully on us for its long hour, conversations began again. A guitar resumed its playing; even the wind-chimes rang out their tinkling song.

I watched the sky for another ten minutes, then began walking. The streets were rather empty. I was down behind the breaklight if anything, down in the bowl of darkening air that cradled the town, so that there was a ragged skyline of rooftops against the effulgence.

I was revelling in the sweet melancholy of it all, with a déjà-vu brought on by the fragrances from nearby gardens

and a snatch of song that had taken my thoughts.

Then I saw her.

A mirror woman walking towards me across the square.

I saw her by the strange luminosity these projections have, and she was beautiful, strikingly beautiful, with high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes and a slender neck, her golden hair partly gathered up, only to be sent cascading down her back and along her shoulders, in glorious contrast to her gown of crimson-black.

I stood where I was in the middle of the square, captivated by the image.

"Come away!" a voice said at my elbow, from an old man I had not previously noticed. He had a cruel scar down one cheek. "You don't need that."

But it was too late.

"Hello," the mirror woman said. "I am Seianne. I was hoping to find you."

"Tom," I said. And again, with a nervousness that surprised me: "Tom."

"I know, Tom. I watched for you tonight."

"I don't believe that."

"But it's true. If I can afford this image, don't you think I would know when a particular person was coming . . . Captain of the *Rynosseros*? I've been looking for you."

I stared at her. At those eyes, at her breasts, at her hair, radiant by breaklight and at any hour, I knew.

"You're too beautiful," I said. "You're using subliminals!"

The enantiomorph laughed, a lovely clear free sound, one more cliché trait to add to the list. "No. No. No. That would spoil it, Tom. If nothing else, this is for me. For itself. You're just noticing things more clearly. Walk with me. I only have the hour."

So we walked and she took my arm. The pressure of her hand was light, feather light, but still real enough.

I was entranced. In spite of what I knew about these projections, I was captivated. And curious too.

"If you're wondering, Tom, yes, you can kiss me. After a fashion."

I felt a stab of alarm. How could this beautiful ghost-woman know my thoughts?

"Then . . ."

"Yes. That too, in a way. But later. On another evening perhaps."

We were together for the hour of the breaklight, from after sunset until full night.

First, we walked back towards the Gaza, close to Trimori's, though I would have hated to have Rim see me with a phantom. People watched us at it was, fascinated by the gently glowing figure at my side.

I avoided the terraces and the Promenade, but took her close by the seawall to a little place I know called Amberlin's. I had a margarita and she had nothing. She smiled at me when she refused my offer, saying she wanted a clear head. This projection had a sense of the absurd.

We sat looking out at the ocean. Most of the other patrons gave us looks, of sympathy or envy or a mixture of both, then ignored us. We became like any other couple, two people getting to know one another.

I kept telling myself that men and women are no more present than they are willing to be, and that Seianne was probably as much with me as this projection as any of the women sitting there in the flesh at the nearby tables were with their partners.

That's what I told myself, and I needed to believe it then.

But I asked her about it just the same, as much to hear her speak as anything.

"Why like this, Seianne?"

My companion shrugged "It's probably the romance of it," she said. "And the risk. At any moment I could vanish on you."

"No more than I can," I said, aiming my words at the woman beyond the phantom.

"Oh?"

"In the end, you have no more power over me than I have over you. I can get up and leave you sitting here That's just like turning you off."

"But you won't," Seianne said.

"No. Not yet. But I can And you would have no more hold on me than I can have on you."

Her eyes flashed with excitement. "Except that there's more to it. You spoke of power. Some men have grown desperate for this image you see, and none of their passion or determination has stopped it vanishing. There are even some who still ache to have me, who go to great pains to disguise it, and who say I'm cruel. They, too, will say they have walked away, but they haven't gone a single step."

"Is that what you intend for me, Seianne?"

"Are you desperate for me yet, Tom?"

And we both smiled, delighting in the game that passion is, and in the freedoms and caution that we yearn to lose or trade—the traps of belonging.

I looked into those too perfect eyes, considering the possibilities for Seianne.

"You could be an old woman behind this mask."

"Or just a plain lonely woman—tired of losing. I really am too beautiful, aren't I?"

"Yes. Or a man keeping alive the memory of a lost love, a wife, a daughter. Using a recording."

"True. Or a man wanting to be a woman. His own anima."

"So?" I asked.

"For now," Seianne said, "I will answer you with an evasion that is important to me."

"And this is?"

"The one thing a woman cannot remain in her dealings with a man is a stranger—an alternative to herself. The man reaches the point where he believes he knows her. He doesn't, of course, but men have this mechanism in them that makes them feel they do. They so often fall in love with the idea of Woman in a woman, and go on to pursue

the magic somewhere else. I've possibly found a way to deal with that, which could be why you see me like this."

"But isn't it transitory, Seianne? Superficial? Don't you want more?"

"How do you know I don't have more already, Tom? You see, you do keep idealizing, making me more—or less – than a real person."

I did not press the topic any further. As the hour drew to its end, we walked back to the square near Sailmaker's, still arm in arm, with her talking softly and me thoroughly beguiled in spite of everything I knew.

"Tell me," I began, when we were down in the streets of the town. "When can I meet your . . ."

"No, Tom!" she said. "First you must bring me something."

"What?" I said, knowing how the principals of these images usually operated, the fees they demanded.

Her answer surprised me. Not money. Not rare woods or antiques.

"Shatterwrack!" she said.

"What?"

"Bring me shatterwrack," she said.

And she turned and walked away, so much flickering ghost-light between the buildings.

I went to follow, but stopped. If Seianne's principal the real Seianne—were nearby watching from one of these buildings or a neighbouring villa, then she might in fact kill the image, deprive me of contact ever again. I would never meet the real Seianne, never again see even this mirror face of her, as false or enhanced as it might be.

So I stood there and considered what I had brought on myself. One of Twilight Beach's oldest tricks.

To make it worse, the old man with the scar was there.

"Hooked, ain't ya?" he said.

But I ignored him, heading back to the Gaza and Trimori's under a black sky and too many stars.

Rim saw I was distracted but kept his questions to himself

as we walked down the Promenade from Trimori's. The ocean broke on our right; there were belltrees and chimes sounding all along the shore, a few tidal bells echoing them from the shallows.

He had concluded business for us and had some bills of lading for a new cargo we were to ferry out to Cobb's Platform.

"Can you handle it without me, Rim?" I said. "I need a few days lay-over."

"Sure, Tom," Rim said "Anything I can do?"

"Thanks, no. I just need time."

Rim considered that, then nodded.

"We'll be back in six days," he said. "Or seven. See you at Amberlin's or Gencardi's."

"At Amberlin's," I said, and watched Rim turn his back on the sea, watching him heading for the sand-ship moorings.

Then I went looking.

There are probably thirty cars in all of Twilight Beach, only thirty; probably seventeen more during the summer when the villas overlooking the sea are occupied for the season.

There are few accidents, few chances to obtain shatterwrack in the obvious way.

I needed Cooney and in a hurry, before Seianne changed her required love-token, before she demanded something even more difficult to obtain.

I walked out onto the Pier, heading for the amusement concessions and brightly-lit kiosks at the far end. There were a lot of people about. The air was filled with laughter and singing, the voices of barkers and hucksters, the shouts of children, the smells of food cooking and incense and the sea.

But Cooney's place was shut and no one knew when he'd be back.

I wasted an hour gazing out at the dark water thinking about my situation –wasted because Cooney didn't turn up and I came to no conclusions.

I knew how foolish I was being, that my ghost was enhanced or a Corpse Mask—the lamia face for some ageing soul. If I wanted, I could make my way back to *Rynosseros* and sail out with the others at first light, out to Cobb's Platform. Nothing would be said.

But all I could think of was Seianne and shatterwrack and the phantom touch of an arm through mine. The thought of being away from Twilight Beach just then was unbearable.

I studied the dark sea, then went back to the Gaza and took a room for the night, Room 777 as I always do when it is available, one up on the Number of the Beast.

The next morning I returned to the Pier, crossing the bleached boards above the bright ocean to Cooney's. His neat little shop-studio was still closed, but a hand at one of the adjoining concessions told me Cooney would be at the Astronomers' Bar later that morning.

So I went to the Astronomers' Bar, one of the Gaza's most popular tourist spots, fitted out with a planetarium star-sky and big windows and models of early NASA probes.

Even at mid-morning the bar was crowded under the star-sky. There were businessmen, tourists, chess-players, professional dreamlocks, the captains of charvolants and their crews, two or three mirage divers, Ab'Os sleek with haldane presence, even a few astronomers from the local observatory. And the merchant of shatterwrack sitting in his corner.

I approached the bald man. His paid woman recognized me and moved away.

"Ahhh!" the man said, identifying me by my fatigues. "What'd you do that for, Cap'n? I hate you already."

"Hate me less, Cooney," I said, smiling and producing money. "I'm a customer."

An unctuous grin split the merchant's face, then faded as more of the man's true nature came back behind the eyes. And there was the spiel.

"So you want shatterwrack. Hard to get now, you know. Getting rarer all the time. It'll cost you, Cap'n."

"For instance?"

Cooney took out a small pouch, balanced it in his palm and shook it. He named a price, ridiculously high.

"A pouch of gems or river pebbles can sound the same," I said.

Cooney loosened the drawstring and poured some of the little cubes and prisms out onto the table.

"Shatterwrack!" the merchant said, scooping up the bright pieces. "Rolls Royce!"

"Forget the pitch, Cooney," I told him. "Just so it's genuine."

I gave him the money, took the pouch and the affidavit for it and went to go.

"Cap'n!" Cooney called. "A question!"

Every trace of the bald man's former bluff manner had disappeared. I went back to the table and waited

"Yes?"

"Is it Seianne?"

"Yes, it's Seianne. Do you know her?"

"Yes, Cap'n. Know of her. People come in from time to time. Why she wants shatterwrack I'll never know. She teases, Cap'n. I've followed her image in the streets, and I've gone up to her with shatterwrack in me fists, hot and begging, and she's just said: 'No, it's not you I want'."

"So why me, Cooney? Why me?"

"Who knows why? Why not? She fancies you, I'd say. It's your turn. You know about the ones who use projections. They're Corpse Masks. Or high-class whores who send out walkin' talkin' advertisements for themselves. You fall in love, then pay dearly for the privilege of the real thing. In money or love-tokens." He gestured at the pouch I was holding. "Otherwise you chase a ghost. Oh, I know. Some folks want to think they're sent by the wealthy young ladies from the villas, or tourists here on a spree. Famous women. Celebrities here for the ultimate dalliance. But most of the time you never meet the

principal, take it from me. You just spend a few evenin's with a ghost and it's over."

"You love her that much, Cooney?"

"For near on three years, Cap'n. I've watched her image walkin' the town, wondering which villa she was in. But I'm wiser'n you."

"How's that?"

"I don't go lookin' anymore. Never at breaklight."

I didn't have Cooney's wisdom. I sat on the terrace during the afternoon, drinking cold tea and waiting for sunset. At 1700 I went back to the Astronomers' Bar but Cooney wasn't there, so I wandered down to the Time Beaches and strolled past the sand-clocks and the wind-clocks and did a long detour through the seagrass up to the Promenade.

For the last fifteen minutes, I watched the players at their flickering boards, set and lost a passing bet with a Niuginian Devil Catcher about a willy willy that looked like menacing two of them, then headed for the avenues leading down into the town.

As I was walking away from the Gaza, the sun slipped below the horizon; there was a lull, then the breaklight flared up the sky. A few of the brighter stars appeared.

I went to Sailmaker's, crossed the square, repeating the events of the previous night.

Another part of that evening was repeated too. As I stood waiting for my ghost, I noticed the old man watching me from a nearby table. His scar was an opalescent smile down his lined face.

There were too many mysteries, and this was one I didn't care for. I felt like speaking to him, asking him what he meant by his words the night before, but Seianne's image appeared at the edge of the square, following its set path, and I missed my chance.

"You came," she said.

"You knew I would," I replied, holding out the small pouch.

The image reached out and took it. I knew only a little about these high resolution enantiomorphs, but she was able to do so and it surprised me.

"No I wasn't sure you'd come, Tom But I'm glad you decided to."

Then she took my arm and we walked.

There are several places in Twilight Beach I love more than the rest. Sailmaker's is one, and Amberlin's. Then there is The Traitor's Face and The Slow Hour. I took Seianne to the Hour. We pretended to dine (I had something), then went back to my room at the Gaza where we sat on the balcony, talking and watching the sea, and I felt just a little of how it would be to have the real Seianne.

But then knowing that Seianne's principal was, in a sense, right there controlling her image —sitting before the sensorium in a villa somewhere—I felt vulnerable, at a ridiculous disadvantage.

"I want to see you, Seianne Meet you." (I wondered how many other men had said those words.)

The image regarded me, but in an oddly abstracted way, as if thinking, as if the idea that I did not see her as a person were an effrontery.

"You might be disappointed," she said.

"Not by what I see and know and feel," I told her, and paused. "Please!" It was the hardest word I'd ever had to say.

"Tomorrow," the ghost of Seianne said, and moved to the door.

I had no choice but to accept what she offered.

We walked together down to the square with its paper lanterns and soft music.

"Tomorrow then," I said, wanting to be sure "At breaklight."

Seianne gave a wistful smile. "Yes, tomorrow. And Tom?"

I waited for her words.

"Bring me shatterwrack."

The ghost walked off amid the eddies of air that were

forming, and the night came down and I was left deeply troubled in my captivity and my folly.

The next day I spent better than the first. The odd feeling of disquiet, of annoyance, I had felt grew stronger, warning me off, telling me that when a game goes past a certain point, then the playing is more important than any thought of ending the game

The second request for shatterwrack worried me that much. It was too much a condition, a price of admission. I half-expected Cooney to be out of town, so I would be left without a supply, disqualified, out of the game.

But the merchant was there in his shop on the Pier when I rushed in. And he had shatterwrack. Two bags. I bought them both.

"Mercedes Benz, Cap'n!" he assured me. "The best quality. The very best."

I handed over the money, took the small bags and the affidavits, more self-consciously than the last time, and so aware of how obsessed and caught I was. "Sure, Cooney I hear you."

And I went back to the town. I made enquiries about Seianne at the Gaza, at Gencardi's, at other places in Twilight Beach, even trying the different retrieval systems at the Library.

By midday I thought I had my answer.

Seven car accidents were recorded for Twilight Beach in the last fifty years, none of the parties involved listed, but the most recent only four years ago.

I thought I had it.

My lovely Seianne had probably been injured in that last accident, scarred or maimed in some way. Confined to a wheelchair perhaps, left with no alternative but to buy a sensorium, to send her cosmetically enhanced image out walking the town looking for lovers.

Looking, finding and testing them. The perfect lamia.

There was the irony of it—Seianne seeking the very shatterwrack that may have scarred her in that accident.

At the time of day when the incident had occurred. Breaklight. I smiled at the word-play. A part of a car was called that.

I keyed in my requests, learned more and more that supported my argument. Then, shortly after noon, when the town was quiet and the bright streets virtually empty under the hot sun, I went down to Sailmaker's to find the scarred man.

My theory had accommodated him too. He was cast as the chauffeur of Seianne's vehicle in the drama I was re-creating, possibly dismissed after the incident, blamed for spoiling his mistress's beauty, cut off, the one held responsible for dooming her to her less respectable form of hunting.

The square was what convinced me I was right. Names weren't listed but places were. Several of the accidents had occurred near Sailmaker's, where the streets were wide enough to allow turns at greater speeds than usual. The crash four years ago had been one of them.

The proprietor of Sailmaker's told me that the old man, Clive Appia, had in fact been a chauffeur once, and that now he cleaned the clocks down at the sculpture garden on the beach below the Gaza.

But as this story was coming together, Clive Appia was —perversely—nowhere to be found, not at the clocks on the Time Beaches, not at his small apartment on Bent Street.

The concierge there let me see his room I rarely used my status as a State of Nation ship's captain quite this way, to unlock doors, but I had to know. Clive Appia had once been a chauffeur. He could have been at the wheel of Seianne's car that evening, or even—it suddenly occurred to me—at the wheel of the other vehicle in the accident.

Or he could be an innocent in all this

I had to know

And sure enough, by the man's bed was a framed photograph of Seianne, showing her smiling, unscarred, exactly as she was in her projection

I thought I had it. I thought I had it all.

That evening, I was waiting below the Gaza, down at the corner of the square in the darkening town.

Breaklight came with its usual sad glory, and the sky became a wash of golden light, stained into the richest blue overhead, stained further back into creeping indigo and growing black.

This time no projection emerged between the buildings. As the light streamed up the sky, a black limousine pulled into the square and stopped.

At last, I thought. Seianne.

But when the young uniformed chauffeur got out and opened the rear passenger door, it was no disfigured socialite who appeared. It was the mirror woman once again, glowing softly, moving towards me over the stones.

The game—the evasion—continued. The infernal playing.

But I waited, clutching my shatterwrack, in case the ghost had come to lead me back to her principal, back to the person I assumed was waiting in the car, a bright shadow playing psychopomp.

The doppelganger drew near and stopped.

"Hello, Tom. Is that for me?"

"This? Well, yes. But for the real Seianne. Is she there?"

I stood clutching my bags and looking beyond her to the car, though I couldn't make out anything at this distance, just the chauffeur waiting by the door.

"Do you love me, Tom?" the image asked.

"I don't know. I could."

"But?"

"You know why. You're not real."

The ghost-Seianne smiled, a forlorn utterly sad smile.

"In a way I'm more real than the Seianne waiting over there."

And, again, I thought I knew it all.

"I know you've been in a car accident, Seianne. Here, four years ago. I know you've been scarred, that you don't

like to be seen. But I need the truth. Let me have the truth. End the game!"

A puzzled look crossed the projection's glowing face, or rather a look of doubt mixed with understanding. It told me that Seianne had no plan, that she was here against her better judgement, just as I was.

"Oh, Tom," the phantom said. "End the game! It's not as easy as that. There's so much to lose. I'm such a very special ghost."

Then, suddenly, there was movement. A figure rushed out into the square, brandishing a gun and shouting—shouting words I could not make out except for a name, a single name.

For an incredible second I thought the newcomer was Cooney, here to show his own thwarted love in a final brutal display.

But no. It was the old man, Clive Appia, stumbling along, heading towards the car.

The chauffeur came forward to stop him. Appia raised the gun and shot him through the heart. The gunshot echoed in the silence.

I drew my long-bladed sticker from my leg-sheath, glad I had it there, the deadly all-purpose friend of the sand-ship sailor.

Appia fired the gun again, and again, hitting the windscreen, the side windows. Fired a fourth time.

Shatterwrack!

Shatterwrack everywhere!

Then my narrow blade was in the air and in the old man's back. He sank to the stones with a soft cry.

Beside me, Seianne—the image-Seianne—gave a low cry of her own and seemed to flicker. I went to help her, then realized my error and ran across to the car instead.

I peered into the back, saw the old woman, the old, terribly old woman, collapsing out of the cowl of a portable sensorium fitted to the edge of the seat. Blood welled from a gunshot wound in her chest. Her eyes focused on me and she tried to speak. With the last

essence of her life she tried, but the words remained unsounded.

Finally she let her head and shoulders slump forward into the cowl of the sender, though I doubted she had the strength even for the image to speak more than a few words.

The beautiful Seianne was suddenly beside me, touching me.

"Don't hate me, Tom. I wouldn't have come if I didn't think you . . I needed something more too . . ." Her voice quavered and she paused. Then: "Not four years . . . forty! And Clive . . . he . . ." Tears and pain registered on the lovely, too perfect face. "Poor Clive . . ."

The hand on my arm flickered and dimmed. The feather-touch was gone.

Seianne died. Both of them—though my fool's vision, my dream-Seianne, remained, and would remain, somewhere.

In the square, there was an emptiness, a silence, in spite of the people who had gathered, in spite of the flaring curtain of light. As if drawn to the silence, two dust devils appeared, skipping, dancing past.

I looked from the two dead men to the withered shape in the back seat of the car—this woman drawn by the risk of playing her game this one time too close to the real world. Playing it as close as she dared and drawn into that game's end.

I had deceived myself so much more than she had ever deceived me. But now I was wise again. I recalled how it so often was with reality and mirrors. Opposites. Distortions. The bright deceptions.

All about me now.

Not shatterwrack. Not breaklight.

Just broken glass at sunset.

DEATH OF A THOUSAND CUTS

by David Ireland

I love my mother as I love nothing else on earth. She is my home, my soil, my country. When the great wrong was done to her, I was still unborn. I grew up to the sound of keening in the morning, to the misery of that story told a thousand times of how my mother's body was penetrated, opened up and exploited; and with the picture of the plump and prosperous wrongdoer constantly before me in his waistcoat of red, white and blue.

When on childhood walks in Dublin on Sundays, I looked over the wall down into the Liffey, it was his face I saw: the face of the monster who went away, but not right away.

His doings and sayings I listened to over and over; his past and present years, his conquests and oppressions, his riches, his arrogance, his closed doors, were reported to me in elaborate and colourful detail.

When I was a child of eight I wanted above all else to close this gaping wound and make my mother's hurt go away; when I was eleven I was obsessed with the idea that it would be the glorious object of my life to avenge her. When I was fourteen and had got over the alarm and shock of my first period I planned what I would do. My plans were elaborate and reached far into the future; they were composed of Dublin colour and Irish sadness, in equal parts. What I didn't know was the precise form my justice

was to take. Where previously I was a little on the lazy side, content to be somewhere in the top group in my high school year, now I worked hard. I abandoned the pursuit of sport and boys and all lesser things, and became the first in my year for the rest of high school.

I entered the Faculty of Medicine at the University in Dublin in my eighteenth year, and worked and thought every living moment towards my goal of medical research in the service of revenge. Each time my mother became slightly ill—with a cold, or a pain somewhere, a dislocation, an ache, a chill, a depression, I was in fear that she might die before I presented her with the triumphant news that her suffering was wiped out.

It worried me sometimes that I was not close to her. My mission seemed to make of me a person apart, but I trusted that my love for her would be sufficient. Often I longed to tell her that her wait for redress was some day coming to an end, and several times I hinted a little in that direction, but always I felt that though she bore with me and said nothing to discourage me, she treated the matter as being so hopeless that she could not accept that it would ever happen. Or perhaps she took what I said not altogether seriously, as if my wish to heal her hurt and close the gaping wound were enough.

Over the years she became curiously disengaged, I thought, from the dreadful thing that had been done to her. Nevertheless she was getting inexorably older, her body shaped more and more like Mother Ireland, and my duty was to overlook her apparent softness or turning away from reality—whichever it was—that probably is a mercy to the aging: my duty was to hold fast my aim until it was achieved.

My resolve continued firm. In fact, I grew in strength all the time as I held the end in view, and that end was my research work. My project was nothing less than the discovery of the mechanism of instant healing, the joining together again of severed human flesh. And, of course, the reverse process.

I attained my ambition of admission as a research student to a famous English medical research laboratory when I was twenty-three. I crossed the Irish Sea and moved to the heartland of the monster, to the seat of his great power. Three years later I was on the brink of discovery of the reverse process I mentioned—the collapse of scar tissue and the opening of old wounds—when the one who had invaded and dominated my mother left this world's stage. It seemed to me that I had failed her, for justice that never arrives is no justice at all. There was one way left that I could attack the heart of the wrong and the injustice, and that was through the monster's descendants. He had a son who had succeeded him in his position of power. I prayed that this representative of the oppressor would live until I had taken my discovery through from the collapse of scar tissue to the process of fast healing of new wounds.

I worked originally with mice on the principle that if I could get old wounds in mouse tissue to open, why wouldn't I succeed with scar tissue in men?

That day was the second best day of my life when my scarred mouse, in response to a five milligram dose of my beautifully simple preparation, spontaneously opened his old wounds—that I had made—and gushed blood.

I worked like a slave to follow the process towards fast healing.

It took me a further five years. I was now thirty-one years of age, and my hair was grey. I had no lovers, no friends: I served my mother's hurt.

It was only with the greatest good fortune that I was able to stay on at the research laboratory, since although I wasn't willing to show all that I had discovered, in case some unforeseen event prevented me going on, I had the support, encouragement and example of my supervisor, Professor Pearse Connolly, whom I trusted and revered.

The monster's descendant lived alone, and I managed to do something I would never have thought I could bear—I ingratiated myself with him sufficiently to go to

live in the same house, and agreed to do things I hated: with food. Yes, I cooked for him, every night he was at home, after my full day's work.

I suppose I was surprised that he accepted so quickly. He never interfered with me, but accepted my work for him with all the usual princely grace of his male John Bull kind: with no gratitude whatever.

Five years after my initial discovery, I held the preparation in my hand that would, in a large man, cause scar tissue of any age to open in the space of two hours and five minutes.

Now I could start the mechanism of my justice in motion.

Every meal I cooked for the monster's son had my fast healing agent in it, and a delayed-action tranquilliser to keep him sound asleep for at least six hours. He fed usually at eight and went to bed at eleven, and the dose levels were set to fit those times, but could be varied if any irregularity showed up in his habits.

While he slept soundly I worked on his body with a scalpel and this is what I did. first I sprayed a local anaesthetic (we call it "snow") on the parts I was going to deal with; next I made the incision; lastly I closed the wound over a topical preparation of my fast healing agent. In an hour I could get through a hundred incisions, but I knew the shock would disable him. I had to be satisfied with between fifteen and twenty cuts a night, all nicely healed in the morning; no blood to be seen, no pain. His body knew something was wrong, for there was a marked lack of vitality in him, which he noticed. He began a course of futile exercises and self-prescribed vitamins, to buck himself up.

The soles of his feet, the palms of his hands, all over back and buttocks and legs, the entire face, the scalp under the hair, in eight months I hade his body a chain of related incisions, many running into others to form lines and squares, circles and triangles. I was dying to use the scar tissue collapse agent. What I had to do was wait for a suitable occasion.

A further five weeks, and the opportunity came knocking loudly. He was to address a meeting of shareholders of the United Kingdom National Business and Banking Corporation which in practice ran the country and of which he was chairman, and which had benefited for so long from the invasion and occupation of my home, my soul and my country: my Mother Ireland. He had made two successful takeover bids in the previous twelve months and was eager to receive congratulations on his brilliant financial manipulations. The press was to attend, since the company's balance sheet and profit figure was news, and there was considerable interest in the forthcoming dividend figure.

The meeting was at seven o'clock in a large international hotel. I saw to it that my mother came, and she wasn't unwilling; in fact she seemed eager, as if glad to see someone long-lost.

We called to see him at his office overlooking the Thames in the huge building his company owned (he was no more than polite to my mother, though for some reason they kissed) and at five-fifteen I brought in from his kitchen annexe a cup of coffee for him, and tea for her. I was too excited to have more than a glass of water. The scar tissue collapse agent went down his hated gullet in the coffee, which he drank with evident pleasure. He informed us that his speech would take thirty-five minutes, and was altogether pleased with himself.

Oddly, my mother looked almost at home, and didn't seem to mind being there with the descendant of the man who had forced himself on her, as if the memory of that invasion had become blurred and indistinct, and the fact of it had grown into her and become part of her life. I daresay I'm fortunate that my memory preserves its contents intact, with their original colours blazing freshly. In the auditorium I made sure we had a seat up front. I said a few things to my mother to try to bring her thoughts round to the man who, before I was born, had done such wrong to her, had caused her such pain, imposed his will

by force and twisted her life. But she was strangely absent, as if distant now from the person she had been when she educated me in the ways of powerful men, and that man in particular. I reminded her that this was the hour of triumph of the son of that man.

She smiled!

'Mother!' I burst out. 'Have you forgotten?'

'No, darling.' Which could be a nice way of saying 'idiot' or nothing. 'Doesn't he look handsome? So like his father.'

'Yes, he is!' I rejoindered savagely. 'He is!'

I could feel her looking at me. I wonder what was going on in her mind. Perhaps she was becoming senile.

The speech began, and though it seemed ineffably boring to me, there was much attention and applause. Television cameras were aimed at the board members and its chairman.

No one was prepared for what happened.

We heard fifteen minutes of mineral resources, agricultural policy, heavy industry investment, monetary policy, foreign capital, international money markets, gold balances, deficit financing, debt restructuring.

At exactly seven twenty blood gushed from the body of the descendant of the man who forced himself on my mother and trampled her in the dust of famine and broken families and war, as a thousand tiny mouths opened, two thousand wafer-thin lips parted. From head to foot, all over his body the blood ran; from the soles of his feet, the palms of his hands, his face, scalp, back, arms, legs, chest, stomach.

He began to collapse, while audience and cameras drank in the spectacle. Every visible part of him was blood. When he bent at the knees to kneel and take the pain from the cuts on the soles of his feet, his knee wounds parted wider, tearing the skin; there was nowhere he could be, or stand, or sit or lie, on the platform without his whole weight resting on a pattern of open wounds. Even his hair was red. His light grey suit showed blood soaking through from where it made contact with the

bleeding flesh. The patterns of squares, circles and triangles were out of sight, not to be appreciated till the post-mortem.

The shock of seeing his own blood, the shock to all the systems of his body from massive blood loss, these held him speechless. The scarlet head and face, the dripping red hands, the steadily growing dull red of his immaculate grey suit; all these things stunned the audience.

The television cameras channelled his fate to a worldwide public, as he sank in a widening pool of what he had previously contained.

But my mother took it badly. Not at all as I'd expected. She stood, held her arms out to him, and while in this position screamed his name, then gradually sank to a kneeling position: still gazing at him, still with arms outstretched, still screaming.

I was calm, filled with the utter peace of triumph. My life of unremitting effort was vindicated.

By the time I'd finished looking at her and gave my attention to what was on the platform, my mother's years of grief, humiliation and pain were cancelled, paid for, avenged. The object of my life had been achieved.

My mother was keening now, but my brother was dead.

CREATOR

by David Lake

Real are the dreams of Gods
Keats, *Lamia*

It was a fine morning as usual on the planet Olympus, and Jay Crystal was just finishing breakfast in his private palace when the robot butler announced the arrival of the Installer.

Jay rose at once, and almost ran to the cleared room. He had never been so excited in all his immortal life. When he reached the room—yes, there it was—the gleaming machine, like a medium-sized light-smell-sound concert organ, was being rapidly assembled by the red and green painted robots of the Creation Corporation; and there beside them not supervising, for the robots knew their job perfectly, but as it were giving them his blessing—stood the Installer.

The Installer was a dark Olympian, as dark as Jay was fair. His thick eyebrows were now bent in a slightly quizzical smile.

"We took the liberty, sir, of starting before you arrived. We thought you would like the job finished as quickly as possible."

"Yes, yes," said Jay. "Fine. How long will they be?"

"Another minute or so; and then –Mr Crystal, we are so glad you decided to have one. I do admire your work for public kinematron –those delicate, civilised sketches, but you know, the creatron represents the future in the entertainment industry. Besides, using this you can really get inspiration for your kine work. Ah . "

The robots were drawing aside.

"They've finished There now, sir, you have your creatron! Would you now please throw the master switch yourself? That's not just a piece of ceremony: it's essential for the working of such a personalised machine . . ."

Jay moved to the red button-switch on the wall. He touched it lightly with his right index finger, knowing as he did so that the switch was picking up his personal emanations, as it was designed to do; and in milliseconds the creatron sprang to life There was a faint but profound humming sound, and on the display screen high above the console there appeared a jagged track of greenish light.

"That's your brain monitor," said the Installer, smiling gently. "It's basically an insurance device. We don't anticipate you will have any trouble, sir, but just occasionally a client gets so emotionally involved in his creations that we have to—er -assist. All creatron monitors broadcast to our company headquarters, where they are under constant surveillance. At the moment, all the monitor is showing is that you are pleasurably excited As you should be! You want to have a session at once? Yes naturally. I'll send the robots out and then . ."

And then they were seated together at the creatron; or rather, the Installer was seated, but Jay lay forward, comfortably semi-prone, his body supported by the harness, his hands lying lightly on the control panels, his head nested in the sensitive helmet Before and below him, through the great window, lay the void that would be his world—when he created it At the moment it was only a grey amorphous chaos. The Installer was explaining the controls.

"Under your left hand, sir, you have the fundamental

law dials and buttons. Those four in the bottom row are the dimensors, for length, breadth, depth, and the large graduated knob which you twist is for time. Above is the row for forces; analogues of nuclear, electro, weak and gravitation; and above those again is the pseudo-mass setter. It'll all be clearer if you create a world now, for practice."

"Er . . . can I erase it afterwards?"

"Surely," smiled the Installer. "There, on your extreme bottom left is the annihilator. Yes, the red button. Or, if you don't want to destroy your world without trace, above that is this amber button marked 'Store'. That will remove your universe from the working area, but with its whole history recorded, so that you can replay it or return it to the working area for further development. Using 'Store' you can create several different universes. The corresponding button on your right hand—the one marked 'Hold'—that merely suspends time while the working is in progress. The creatures in the world don't notice a thing, of course, because there is no time for them to notice *in*. Among other things, 'Hold' lets you insert a special move if you want to. And the graduated knob below 'Hold' is the Limited Time Cancel; it erases the recent past, and lets you insert a whole new sequence. And those buttons nearby on your right are the initiators, for just such insertions . . ."

Jay frowned. "I've heard of them. Miracle buttons, they call them, don't they?"

"I believe some people do," said the Installer. "Very popular they are, too, with some of our customers. They make creation as easy as sketching with a pencil and rubber."

"And about as artistic," said Jay scornfully.

"Quite so. I can see you are a bit of a purist, Mr Crystal. Well, I like that; so am I. You can get some quite comic effects with the miracle buttons, but it *is* more satisfying to let a world be self-consistent. That's like not cheating when you're playing patience. You lay down the laws at

the start, and then you abide by the consequences. You will have enough degrees of freedom anyway, through the wills of your creatures; or, to put it another way, they'll be self-willed enough to surprise and amuse you. Now, would you like to start?"

Jay set the time control, then pressed "Run" and one of the dimensors. At once there was a white line running across the world-space; or rather, space now existed as one dimension of length isolated and lonely in the midst of chaos.

"What happens if I don't press any more dimensors?" he asked.

"Then you get a one-dimensional universe. That's quite possible; indeed, you can have an amusing, rather classical world with One-D. Of course, all your creatures will have to be line-masses, and they won't be able to cross or pass each other . . ."

Jay hurriedly pressed the second dimensor. At once chaos vanished, and the world became one vast sheet of pale grey.

"Now you have Flatland," said the Installer. "One of our clients a Mr Abbas, achieved a notable creation in two dimensions . . ."

"With circles and squares for characters," said Jay. "Yes, I've heard. But all that's a bit limited. Lacks human interest." He touched the third dimensor.

The pale greyness changed subtly. He felt a thrill of vertigo: it was as though he were looking down an infinite height, frightful, fathomless utter emptiness forever. He clutched desperately at his armrests.

"Realistic, isn't it?" said the Installer. "Don't worry, you can't possibly fall *into* it. That space is totally unreal in our terms; it has no more existence than a space described in a work of fiction. Or, to put it another way, it is *inside* you—in your mind. It will be less frightening when you've filled it with something. Now, go on, Mr Crystal give your world some laws. May I suggest, if you want something realistic, the following settings, just to start with."

Jay followed his instructions, and punched the buttons. The next moment he couldn't help shouting with amazement. All at once, through the window, there were shining sparks in a blackness, like a silent firework display.

"There now," said the Installer. "You have just created light and matter, and your universe is exploding. If you turn the Time control anticlockwise, the explosion will become a sedate expansion . . . yes, so. Those sailing blobs are galaxies. Now, if you want a close-up view of one, this View control above the depth button . . ."

For half an hour of real time Jay manoeuvred, fascinated. He seemed to plunge into the heart of a galaxy, which was now condensing into stars. He watched a solar system form about a young yellow star, and then he followed a small planet through its evolution until the asteroids stopped falling on it, and the cratered surface spewed out air and water, and nearly the whole surface was a steaming, cloud-wreathed ocean.

"Now is the time to create life," said the Installer softly.

"Doesn't it arise automatically?" asked Jay, surprised.

"Nothing really arises 'automatically', Mr Crystal. The whole machine only works because your mental impulses are being implemented. And there are certain crucial stages which require a special impulse from you. This is one of them. But all you have to do is *will* it, and it will happen. Say 'let there be life', if you like . . . the verbalisation is sometimes a help."

"Let there be life," said Jay.

And there was life. At this setting of the Time control a billion years passed by in a minute. In two minutes there was a fringe of green around the shores of the growing continents. In four minutes, there were vast forests, and amphibians floundering through them. Then Jay touched a control under his left hand, and slowed down created Time with respect to the Olympian viewers.

Now it took a few minutes to evolve giant reptiles, birds, mammals. And Jay began to feel increasingly strange and uncomfortable. He squirmed.

"I . . ." he began.

"Not to worry," said the Installer, one eye on the monitor screen, one hand on Jay's arm. "This is normal, sir. You are creating higher life forms, aren't you? They are beginning to have a clearer and clearer consciousness. And of course it's *your* consciousness in every one of them. Tell me how it feels to you."

"As if I'm being torn apart. Divided in a million pieces. And being stabbed with a million needles."

"Quite so. You can control that two ways. First, mechanically—that grey dial on your right, marked 'Empathy', turn it anticlockwise and the pains will fade. But so will the involvement. Experienced creators damp the pains without losing involvement, by a technique of mental relaxation. I can show you that, if you like, but it will take a bit of time. We'd have to have another session, perhaps several. There's no extra charge for that, if you wish it. It's part of installation service. I always use relaxation myself, I may say."

"You mean, you—you practise creation too?" said Jay.

"Of course, sir. I have my own 'tron at home. I have to be an experienced practitioner, you realise, otherwise I could hardly advise clients."

The next moment, Jay uttered a yelp. The Installer leant across and twisted the grey dial to the left.

"Pardon me, sir: you can turn it up if you like, but I wanted to shield you from emotional insult. What *was* that, if I may ask? My guest viewer here is not so finely adjusted as your master one."

"A primate," said Jay shakily. "It was caught and slowly crushed by a huge constricting snake. I could feel its fear, its horror, its pain." He pondered. "Say, this is *my* creation, isn't it? *My universe*! Why do I have to have pain in it? Isn't there a setting, or something, that I can introduce to stop all that kind of thing?"

"Well," said the Installer, with a slow, dark smile, "if you feel that way, you have several possible strategies. Number One: you can slightly alter the fundamental laws.

With a different ratio between the four forces, you could make sentient life impossible anywhere in your universe, as you said. Strategy Number Two: use one of the miracle buttons. Actually, you can insert a set program, so that life develops with no sensory nerves, hence no pain but no pleasure either. That way, you'd have to program for another series of miracles, to keep the things alive at all—because of course with no pain they'd always be getting killed. They'd have no incentive, you see, to avoid falling over cliffs and so on. Wouldn't you agree, sir, that that would be, well, rather an inartistic universe? Your creatures would be zombies; and you couldn't get any kind of kick out of them. Believe me, I know; I tried that once myself, as an experiment. It was only good for laughs. Well, there remains Strategy Number Three—discreet miracles."

"What do you mean?" asked Jay.

"You can punch the Hold button at various critical moments for example, you could have saved that primate by pressing Hold and then annihilating that snake. That button on top left the orange one—that's the Selective Erase. You can even program the machine to make that happen every time, in defined situations, so that you don't have to sit up all night working a billion separate miracles an hour. And you can even interfere with evolution along the same lines—this is a little more complicated, but I'll show you how—and wipe out the breeding stock of reptiles which would develop into snakes. And so on."

"Inartistic," said Jay dully. "Isn't there any other way?"

"I'm afraid not. There is no way to have pleasant things without unpleasant things except by miracles." He paused, and half rose. "Well, sir, if you'll excuse me, I have another appointment in half an hour—another installation. Business is booming, you see. But if you like, I'll come around tomorrow to see how you're making out."

"Yes, yes," said Jay absently. He had pressed the Hold button, and his universe, though it didn't know it, was in

stasis. For one of his primate species had descended from the trees; and now he was thinking about the creation of Man.

Next morning, when the robot butler emitted a discreet electronic cough, Jay was deeply engrossed in the creatron. At the third cough, which was as loud as that of a large carnivore in the world of his private creation, Jay finally looked up.

"Mr Harriman, sir."

"Who?"

"The Installer, from the Creation Corporation."

"Show him in, show him in right away," said Jay irritably. "I need him now."

Harriman glided in with his usual faint dark smile. "Well, Mr Crystal, how are you making out?"

"Not too well," Jay admitted. "In fact, I'm having trouble developing a humanoid species at all. I . . . I've tried with likely primates on several planets, and . . . well, I've had to use some miracle buttons . . . I thought that mightn't matter just for practice. I picked the likeliest looking species, and then killed them off . . . I mean annihilated . . . its nearest rivals . . ."

"What, individually? That must have been a colossal task!"

"No, I looked at the instruction tapes and I . . . er . . set up a program. The program identified any over-violent, over aggressive primate species . . . giant carnivorous gorillas and such like . . . and automatically wiped them out."

"That was clever handling, I must say," said Harriman. "I thought I would have to explain to you about programming, but I see you've beaten me to it. Well, sir, what happened after you wiped out those monster primates? Can I . . . er . . . inspect?"

"Sure," said Jay; and they both bent over their viewers. Harriman showed Jay how to increase the specificity and magnification of the guest viewer; and now they both got a good look at a sylvan scene.

The planet was much like Olympus, with a yellow sun and a blue sky, but of course much wilder, with huge forests and tropical savannas. And there, on the fringe of a warm forest, they saw a troop of primates. There were some fifty individuals of both sexes and all ages, a good deal hairier than humans, but with bare flat faces, and delicate features. A few were strolling among the trees, unhurriedly foraging for fruit, some on all fours, others on their hind legs. They were clearly able to walk bipedally, but they were not being purists about it. It sometimes happened that two foragers came up to a luscious fruit about the same time: when this happened, each blinked at the other, and then backed away with a curious little simper. Neither got the fruit: both went off to look for pickings elsewhere.

All of a sudden another troop of the creatures emerged from the depths of the forest.

"This should be interesting," said Harriman in Jay's ear. "A crisis situation. Now, in my worlds I've always found — hey, what's wrong with them?"

The "crisis situation" was resolving itself very simply. The invading troop infiltrated the earlier arrivals, who blinked at them and simpered. The invaders simpered back. They took one look at the wide savanna ahead, whinnied or whimpered a little, and melted back into the deep forest.

"Well!" said Harriman. "Is that what always happens, when two groups meet? No battles, no defence of territory?"

"No," said Jay sharply. "I'm happy to say, my people are not violent types. I chose the most peaceful species I could find. I wanted to avoid the unhappy history of our own early development."

"I see. And do your peaceful 'people' never go out onto the savanna?"

"Never, you see, there are large carnivores out there."

"Aren't your people carnivores themselves? I should have thought . . ."

"Certainly not," said Jay. "They're strict vegetarians. I want to develop a decent civilisation, without all the outmoded barbarism. You know that's the kind of ideal I have been promoting in my kine sketches—civilised interaction between individuals and species. Surely it's important to start right?"

Harriman took a deep breath. "Yes, it is," he said. "Tell me, how long in their terms has your species there been living at that evolutionary level? Semi-bipedal forest living fruit-eaters, with no weapons . . . er, perhaps I should say tools?"

"Twenty million years," said Jay disconsolately. "And in that time on this planet my program has eliminated four cousin species, all savage hunters."

"Well, Mr Crystal," said Harriman, "that was your mistake. You have obviously, through your program, eliminated four very promising candidates for full humanity."

"Humanity?" cried Jay. "They were murderous beasts . . ."

"So were we all, once," said Harriman, with a gleam in his dark eyes. "And the beast still lurks in us; our civilisation is just a veneer, necessary perhaps, but at bottom, for many of us, rather *boring*. Hence, largely, this boom in the creation business. The big Box allows many people to indulge harmlessly in delicious savagery. Wait till I've shown you the full scope of the empathy techniques, Mr Crystal. Then perhaps you'll change your ideas a little as to what's desirable and undesirable in a sub-world. Wouldn't you like to be, say, the savage leader of a mighty horde of magnificent barbarians, roaming through the jungle and the desert, the mountain and the plain, sacking towns and cities, holding at your mercy your cowering enemies and their equally cowering but much more attractive women?"

"I would *not!*"

"Oh never mind," sighed Harriman. "But look, sir, whatever your ultimate ideals, let me tell you that you'll

never create a human-type species this way, out of these nice guys. Nice guys come last. In fact, they don't even run at all. Two things you need: meat-eating, for a start; and aggression, selfishness, sheer death-take-the-hindmost competition as well. Hunting skills, brains, and the competition with other members of the same species . . . that makes for real *ambition*. Ambition is what got us to Olympus in the first place. You remember how space travel began? It was a space race that put our race in space."

"There must be another way," said Jay stubbornly. "Look, Harriman, we may have made it to Olympus, but . . . I've read history too, you know . . . we wrecked our original planet doing it, and damn nearly exterminated ourselves in the process. The damage we did to the universe! I'd like to explore a better way, to see if I can't create a race without our evils. This is not just a game; if I succeed, I may have some vital message to give to all of us in the real world."

"All right . . . try," said Harriman, shrugging. "I'll teach you all there is to know about the machine, all the techniques of programming, empathy, and so on. And then it'll be up to you. I might make one suggestion, though."

"What's that?"

"If you have to use the miracle buttons to favour one subhuman species over another, pick the meanest, the cunningest, the most bloody-minded one that the planet offers, that way you'll speed up the evolution of true humanity very much. Oh, all right, all right, I know you won't . . . in that case, why not merely let things take their course? Keep off the miracle buttons, and see what evolution throws up. When they're wearing clothes—and swords—then you can take them in hand, and try to tame them. There are techniques for tampering even with intelligent species, you know, to make them milder or fiercer. For instance, you do this . . ."

By the end of that session Jay was handling the creatron so expertly that Harriman decided he could be

left to get on with his experiments for several days. In fact, it was a whole week before the butler announced him again. Jay had not been actually on the creatron, but pacing beside it. When Harriman entered, he went forward, almost running, to meet him.

"Harriman, I . . . it's overwhelming . . ." he flustered.

"It *is* rather exciting, once you get into it, isn't it?" said the dark visitor, smiling. "Well, tell me all about it. You know, Mr Crystal, we will soon be able to cross you off my list of *new* clients, and then the maintenance departments of the Corporation will be officially in charge of you, not my team. After that, I hope we can be just fellow practitioners of the great art; and—why not?—friends. Well now, Mr Crystal . . ."

"Call me Jay," said Jay. "Please."

"All right, Jay, if you'll call me Sam . . . short for Samael. All my friends do."

"Sam, I've created Man."

"Congratulations, Jay. What did you do?"

"Nothing really. I let evolution take its course, and humanity arose! They became very like us."

"What, those silly good-natured ape-men in the forest?"

"Oh, hell no," said Jay, waving his hand as though brushing away an insect. "I got rid of them. In fact, I decided not to cheat any more—no more miracle buttons—so I started from scratch. I erased my first universe . . ."

"Your whole *universe!* Why not just the planet?"

"I had messed about too much," said Jay contritely. "I wanted to start over, clean. So I did. Set up the four laws, and the mass constant, and ran up the new universe at top speed. Then I chose a middling sized galaxy, and began to watch various promising yellow suns. I just *watched.* Many of them developed the right sort of planets, and I created life over and over, just by willing it, as you showed me. And then I let the Life behave as it wanted to. I used the middle empathy band . . . it was a really weird sensation."

"It sure is," said Harriman, with a reminiscent gleam in his dark eyes. "You feel it coming out of your gut, don't you? All of them: the sharks, the snakes, the dinosaurs, the tigers. I like to use the micro-focus sometimes, and feel myself giving birth to the little fellows, the bacteria, the viruses. Hell, I've fissioned myself into a billion bugs: syphilis, rabies, cancer cells, and also into the leucocytes that go for them. I've killed myself, eaten myself on all levels. There's no kick like it."

"Yes, well, it's certainly disturbing," said Jay, passing his hand dazedly over his fair hair. "So much horror, so much evil—it becomes evil, after all, when you reach the highest animals—and every bit of it was *me!* Out of the darkness of my mind, the things I hate took form. To be frank, I nearly went crazy from time to time: I had to fight hard not to reach for the miracle buttons and exterminate monster after monster. But I didn't touch the buttons; I let those nightmares do what they wanted to do!" He paused, shuddering.

"You *did* practise the relax-withdrawal, didn't you?" said Harriman anxiously. "Things might get rough if you didn't."

"Oh, sure, I withdrew," said Jay flatly. "What else? Do you think I could stand deep empathy, or even middle empathy, with a *massacre*? When I was all the victims and all the killers at the same time?"

"Okay, okay," said Harriman. "So . . . what did you come up with?"

"Civilisations," said Jay, "many civilisations, on many planets. Not all were humanoids. Great Olympus, I've been centaurs, I've been dolphins, kangaroids, octopoids, but in the end it was the humanoids who fascinated me most. So *like* us!"

"And were there any meek and mild races among your civilisations?"

"Not one," admitted Jay sadly. "All carnivores and killers, like you said, Sam. I suppose it had to be that way at the start. Paradise was never lost, but maybe it can be found.

That's what I want to work towards. Meanwhile, meanwhile, I must say, some of my races have done the most astonishing things! Why, they've even produced *literature*!"

"They frequently do," nodded Harriman, smiling. "In fact, a lot of the kine-writers plagiarise from the works of their own creatures. You might think of that yourself, Jay. It's not really cheating. After all, your creatures are *you*. They're a part of your mind which you're liberating, putting to use."

"I never imagined I could write anything like *this*," said Jay. "I transcribed it onto tape." He flicked a switch. "Listen! Of course, this is only a translation into our language, from one that my creatures invented. It sounds much better in the original, which—great Olympus! I understand perfectly. It's from a huge long poem."

The remote, impersonal voice of the speech-synthesiser began to chant:

"Full well I know in my heart that the sacred city will fall,
The day shall come when Troy and her king will be laid low,
Priam and Priam's people, the folk of the strong ash spear:
Yet not for them do I grieve, the queen, the king nor my brothers
Many and brave, who will fall in the dust before the foemen,
But for you, dear wife, in the day when some bronze-coated Akhaian
Shall lead you away a slave weeping for your lost freedom.
Then in some foreign land will you bend to your master's will
At the hard toil of the loom, or under the burden of water,
Bearing your load from enemy streams to enemy houses.

Some man shall say as he sees you, 'Why that was the
wife of Hektor,
The best of heroes in war, when men still fought
about Troy.'
So shall one say, and bring fresh grief to you,
friendless and widowed;
But let me be dead in that day, and let the heaped
earth hide me
Before I hear your cries, as they drag you into
slavery."

The voice passed into silence, and Jay switched off the tape. He said, "They don't write poetry like that nowadays, not in *our* universe."

Harriman shrugged. "Of course not. How can they . . . how can we? We have a comfortable civilisation, and the immortality pill, and wars are banned by the United Planets Organisation. Just look at what makes up great poetry—for instance, that extract you taped, which I agree is pretty good: death, war, slavery, the blackest of evils. Sheer tragedy. Without that, no brilliant poetry. And no kicks. You have to go to your sub-universes now for those. Say, by the way, what race produced that poem? They must be pretty good, even by *my* standards "

Jay shuddered. "They're the most frightening of all humanoids. Not much to look at. In relative measurements rather small, in fact nearly all specimens are well under eight feet—"

"The runts!" said Harriman, grimacing.

"—but they make up for that in their fierceness, in grim determination, in sheer ingenious *cruelty*. When I realise that they're *me* " He shook his head. "I must do something about them. They're a challenge to all I love and believe in."

"Why not just press a certain button?" said Harriman. "Jay, it's not worth upsetting yourself."

"No . . . no more annihilations," said Jay firmly. "I promised that to myself. These people are *mine*. I must help them, change them. I'll think of something." He seemed to

change the subject. "Sam, can you tell me one little thing? What's that knob for, on the extreme top right of the control panel?"

"What knob?"

"This," said Jay, touching it. The thing was a small projection, a metal hump on the main body of the panel.

"That . . . oh, nothing," said Harriman, with a quick little laugh. "That shouldn't be on there. In one version of the machine there was an extra control there for a special kind of empathy, but we found it too dangerous, and the control was discarded. It's surely not functional on yours."

"Dangerous?" said Jay slowly. "*Can* the creatron be dangerous? In the real world, I mean?"

"Not if you use it sensibly," said Harriman, "but in the early days of the development we had a few accidents with people who *weren't* sensible. In one of the worst accidents . . . well, we never could find out *exactly* what happened, because you know if the creator *dies*, all his universes are automatically erased. Their being is his being, and when he goes, so do they."

"Somebody *died*?" said Jay, huge-eyed. "On *Olympus*? How is it that didn't make the newscasts?"

"It wasn't on Olympus, luckily," said Harriman. "It was on Amentet, which is practically owned by our Corporation, so luckily we were able to hush the matter up. Anyway, it was the guy's own fault—he got hooked by the Box, and we didn't have enough experience at that time to read the signs of addiction. He was a Corporation employee, name of O. Siris, I believe—he kept muttering that he was being torn apart, and then finally he *was* torn apart. He had been bleeding from more than a dozen wounds when they found his body, still strapped to the machine. You see, some dreams can be deadly, if you let them take hold of you. Now, Jay, you have been warned. These present models are much safer than the early ones, but that monitor is not there for nothing. And if you feel you're getting into any kind of trouble, don't hesitate to get me on the laserphone."

"All right," said Jay.

The fine Olympian days went by. Jay was now thoroughly absorbed by his hobby, his creatron; no longer did he write for the big 3-D screen, but then he didn't need to: he had an adequate income from his royalties on former works plus the basic salary paid by the United Planets to all citizens as of right, the Existence Benefit. The cut-down in his work hardly mattered: he felt that he was deepening his understanding of human nature so much with his new dream box that when he returned to kine-writing he would produce masterpieces. What was perhaps more serious was that his absorption in the sub-world was sapping his social life in the real universe. His current girlfriend, Aphra, complained about it. One early morning, as they lay on Jay's anti gravity bed, Aphra swallowed the pill which rendered her at once immortal and sterile, washed it down with a shot glass of nectar, and said: "Jay, I'm leaving."

"Yes," said Jay vaguely. "I suppose it's time." He slipped off the other side of the bed and reached for his robe, his eyes unfocused.

Aphra sat up sharply on the foam force-field, her long yellow hair waving like angry snakes, her usually soulful blue eyes for once contracted in irritation.

"No," she said, "I mean, I've had enough. Pay attention, will you? Your mind's not on it when we make love any more. Well, you aren't the only fellow who . . . Sam, for instance, now he's more fun to be with, there's a bit of spice to him! And he can take that Box or leave it. If you want to see me again, Jay, give me a lase at his place."

Jay let her go, nodding absent mindedly. He was not jealous. Besides, Sam was now his best friend. He would take good care of Aphra.

And Sam came round almost every day now, to swap yarns about sub universes. Their dealer-client relationship was now officially at an end: they were merely two fans together. Sam seemed to be much more relaxed about the possible dangers of the creatron.

"I checked with the Corp," he said, on one of these

visits. "The Total Empathy control is *not* functional on your machine. For some reason the button's still there under that metal cap, but the technicians assured me that there's no connections under it. All new models, from now on, will have no button there at all. Anyway, I know you can't do anything foolish like that guy Siris." He smiled, and nodded at the creatron. "How's it going in there, Jay?"

"Terrible . . . and wonderful." Jay swallowed. "Whenever I take it off Hold I've got the Time control set for scanning at a year an hour on that planet I mentioned to you. Yes, I know that's slow, but I'm following their civilisations in detail now. I've moved on about two centuries from the time of that poem I quoted, and . . . strange things are happening, Sam. They're developing philosophy, *religion* . . ."

"Yeah, they usually do," said Harriman, grinning. "I always enjoy my creatures' religions. Every one of them involves humanoid sacrifices—some of them very ingenious in their methods—and quite often the sacrifices are offered to Guess Who? Me, yours truly, the owner and maker of the universe, Samael Harriman himself!"

Jay shuddered. "There's some of that in my world, too. It's horrible. But . . . I have hopes. It's decreasing, especially in a belt about the middle of my world's greatest continent-complex. Over the last two centuries, there have been some brilliant men arising, in several different cultures. One little tribe gave up human sacrifice long ago, and substituted animals. Then, recently, one of their best men denounced even that. Curiously enough, he claimed to speak in *my* name. He told his people that I wanted 'mercy, and not sacrifice'. And in other countries, other men have been saying much the same thing. Look: let's get on the machine, and I'll show you."

When they were at the viewers, Jay swept the scanner down through the clouds of that blue and white planet. Below them lay the peaks of a towering mountain range capped with ice and snow. Jay swept southwards, at decreasing altitude, until they seemed to be hovering with

an eagle's-eye-view over a wide river-plain—a warm area, with jungles and narrow clearings where a brown-skinned people were growing rice. Here and there the clearings became wider, and in their centres, on the banks of the rivers, rose walled cities, cities that looked well laid-out, with busy markets, gorgeous palaces, richly adorned temples, and spacious parks.

Finally, Jay narrowed the view to one city, and in that city to a beautiful park. In the distance, tame protected royal deer were wandering over lawns and between flame-of-the-forest trees. Closer up, between the scattered trees sat, squatted, stood or strolled a large crowd of all kinds of people: little clusters of the bejewelled nobles and merchants, with their bodyguards and slaves of both sexes; shaven-headed priests; and a large ragged rabble of common folk, men, women and children, with a fringe of dirty and diseased beggars. Towards the centre of this crowd was a cleared space around a great green-leaved tree. Before the tree, in the front rank of the crowd, sat a handful of gaunt men in yellow robes. and facing these and the whole crowd, there sat under the tree another yellow-robed man, a man less gaunt, with an imposing presence and handsome, composed features.

That, at least, was the scene as Harriman saw it. For Jay, it was different: for he not only *saw* the scene, he *was* it. He was that hot earth, that grass, and his were the branches and green twigs that swayed in the warm breeze. These sensations were relatively dim; much more strongly, he felt the life of the deer browsing in the distance, and of the crowd milling in the foreground: he was proud and well-fed in the nobles, he was seductive in their dancing girls; he was lusty in the young farmer come into the city for the day, he was in dull pain in the old beggar with the crippled knee.

But above all, he was in the man under the tree.

He felt a vast compassion rise in him, as he looked through the man's eyes at the crowd. Suffering . . . all the world was suffering. birth was suffering, old age was

suffering, sickness was suffering, death was suffering. Contact with unpleasant things was suffering, parting from what one wanted was suffering. And only he knew the cure, only he could teach that best way out, the Middle Path . . .

And so he, the Enlightened One, taught them. The Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Five Precepts. All life was sacred: therefore abstain from injuring any living creature. And all life was *one*: the idea that you had an individual, eternal soul was the great illusion from which you had to break free. If you clung to that illusory self, you would remain bound on the wheel of suffering existence

"*Sabbe sankhāra dukkha.*" The words of that warm country's language came fluently out of his mouth, sonorous but not strange, since he had the gift of all his creatures' tongues. "All compounded things are suffering . . ."

The crowd was impressed A few of the people plucked up courage to ask him questions A priest:

"How should one sacrifice to the gods, O Enlightened One?"

"The best sacrifice is that of right moral action, of mercy to all living things. As for the gods, they too are fellow creatures, they too need enlightenment."

"O Holy One!" cried a woman suddenly She was a new arrival; she bore on her hip a baby which . no, not a baby: the only life in it was on the microscopic level of decay. The corpse of a baby. To this personal grief she clung; and was therefore bound. "O Holy One, you know all secrets: grant me a charm, a medicine to bring my son back to life!"

And he answered her: "Go woman, to every house in the city where there has been no death, and ask of them one mustard seed."

"But," said the woman, stricken, "the city is old: in every house there has been death."

At this point Jay began to withdraw from the scene, his viewpoint rising till he was looking down on the deer park

through the eyes of a brown hawk that glided and soared, uttering mournful, tinkling cries as it scanned the earth in hopes of prey. He pressed the Hold button.

As they both got off the machine, he translated for Harriman the message of the man under the tree. He felt astonished and elated. He finished. "I didn't know I had any such things in me! Me, the Enlightened One! Why, Sam, on the strength of that I could set up as a philosopher in *this* world!"

Sam yawned. "I could tell it was *your* world all right, Jay. *My* bright boys don't come up with teachings of that kind Currently, my people are going strong for Zapism."

"Zapism?"

"Yeah. The First Noble Truth of Zapism is stated like this: Zap a rat before he zaps you. Thus spake my Zapathrustra. However, Jay, I'll hand it to you: your world there is brilliant, complex, *artistic*. I liked your whole crowd, the beggars, the prostitutes, the bully boys, the nobles. You've really got tremendous talent—no, that's too weak—I should say, genius. My worlds are cruder, simpler."

"Sam," said Jay, "what did he mean by saying 'the gods are our fellow creatures, they too need enlightenment'? He was talking about *us*, wasn't he?"

"I guess so," said Harriman. "Why not?"

"But . . . but he sounded as if he *knew* about us, as if we were on the same plane of reality as himself!"

"Again, why not?" Harriman smiled darkly. "After all, that guy is really a part of your mind, Jay, so in one sense he *is* on the same plane And our creatures *do* get inklings about us. That's a thing we fans discovered pretty early in the game." He laughed, shortly. "Before he had that accident, that guy Sims said something that gave us all in the Corp a bit of a jolt. See what you make of it, O Enlightened One! He said, 'We made the sub-worlds, but who made *our* world? Maybe the sub worlders did. We invent them, they invent us. You scratch my essence, I scratch yours. Mutual make-believe! It's creative writing

that makes the worlds go round . . .' How about that, huh?"

Jay muttered, "Herakleitos!"

"I beg your pardon," said Harriman. "Is that a new swearword, or something?"

"No," said Jay. "Herakleitos is one of the philosophers of that planet in my sub universe. He has ideas very like the one you mentioned. He lives in a country a bit to the north-west of the one we were looking at; they're a brilliant people too. You would like them: very artistic, but very bloody-minded. Herakleitos is one of the bloodiest-minded and the cleverest of them. He says that gods and men live in a mutual relationship—each produces the other. He also says that all existence depends on conflict, strife, war: if conflict were to cease, the whole universe would disappear."

"He's dead right," snuled Harriman. "At least, he'd be right in *my* universe, because if the battles stopped in my world I'd press the erase button. Eternal peace is just too boring to be endured. Jay, I like the sound of your Herak guy much better than the one you just showed me: he's really on the ball."

"I must prove him wrong," muttered Jay. "Oh yes, I've learnt now that *some* aggression is necessary, in the early development of humanity. But not so much, not what is actually going on in most places of my world! War, massacre, slavery, torture . . . surely that *doesn't* have to go on."

"Oh yes it does," said Harriman crisply. "It has to go on *somewhere*, Jay, or we'll go nuts. You don't realise it, but we of the Creation Corp, we really saved our civilisation from a general breakdown. Before the Box was invented, you should have seen the figures for intakes into mental hospitals, attempted suicides, even *murders*. People must have kicks, you know. Now they get 'em in their private Boxes, that's all. That's why we can afford peace and painless living in the big world, the real world."

"The other worlds are real, too," said Jay. "You've already admitted that. And I know it's true. When I am *in*

there, it's as real as here. To think that I once annihilated a whole universe!" He shuddered.

Harriman laughed. "Why, that's the biggest kick of all. Only, it's best not to erase it all simultaneously. If you do, they're all gone without knowing about it. If you erase selectively, *then* you can have fun, as the poor saps see their suns and moons disappearing, and then the next county, and so on. I always end a game that way."

Jay looked at Harriman, appalled. And from then on, their friendship was not what it had been.

For many days after that, Jay buried himself completely in the world of his creation. He did not leave his palace, he did not even leave the room that housed his universe, but had his robots serve his meals right there, on a small table beside the great machine. He ate hurriedly, and then returned at once to that terrible and wonderful blue and white planet.

He still kept Time going at a year an hour, which allowed him to cover a sub-world generation in a couple of Olympian days. Subjectively, when he was in middle or deep empathy, his time was the time of the sub world, which meant that his solid dreams packed what seemed to be the experience of a lifetime into three or four "real" days.

Gradually Jay concentrated his attention on the culture which had produced the terrible philosopher Herakleitos. These people were rising to a peak of glory. Few in numbers, they nevertheless defeated a huge eastern empire and Jay was there when they did it. He entered the brain of a fully-armed warrior, in a sea-fight by a rocky island, and felt the exultation of his host creature as he leapt ashore and drove his spear again and again through the cowering enemies. It should have been horrible, but it was not—the man was in love with what he was doing, namely exercising one of his best skills, and doing so without personal hatred in defence of his beloved city. And, as the fight ended with the enemy all dead or in

chains, words were forming in the hoplite's brain; for, Jay found, he was also a great poet. He would write a tragedy for the next festival, and this fight would be in it. But it would be no boast of his city's prowess: rather, it would be a poem of awe at the justice of the gods, how they smote down overweening pride, the lust for conquest; and the enemy king would be the tragic hero. But their own war song would have a modest place:

"O children of Hellas, onward! Now make free
Your fatherland, your children, wives, your fathers,
Gods and graves: now the fight is for all things . . ."

Jay was also in the theatre on the day when the play was given. It was a great play. Best of all, the audience wept for the sufferings of the *enemy* . . .

Yes, thought Jay, there is a greatness in this people. Perhaps they will transform this world into something better.

He followed them for one, two generations. And now the city which had fought so nobly was itself an Empire, with all the overweening pride and lust for conquest which the old hoplite had denounced. Quarrel after quarrel they picked with their neighbours, until they roused a whole coalition of enemies against them. Any friend of these enemies they attacked, even neutrals.

Jay watched with horror as, in time of peace, the forces of the city besieged a small neutralist island town. Traitors within opened the gates; and then the invading army rounded up the whole population, women and children in one great herd, men in another. Then the soldiers began methodically cutting the throats of the men. The women and children were screaming; but the soldiers made them wait there till the massacre was over before they drove them down to the ships and the slave markets.

One of the city poets made a play after that business, too. But this time the play was bitter and ugly with horror. It was set in legendary times, but the story was much the same: the burning town, the killing, the captive women. The enslaved queen cried:

"O God, our maker, begetter: do you see?"
And the other slave women replied:
"He sees, but the flames still burn . . ."

Jay hurriedly pressed the Hold button, and withdrew. He even withdrew from the creatron room, and for several hours lay in a stupor on his luxurious bed.

When he arose, he had given up all hopes of salvation from the cities of Hellas; and he was also suffering from a profound sense of guilt. *He* was the callous god to whom the slaves cried in vain; he was also all the killers, all the slave masters, all the torturers. Somehow, he must expiate. He thought of the miracle buttons; then shook his head. No, that was merely cheating. And it solved nothing. The evil was in himself; in himself he must destroy it. He would save his world, if it killed him . . .

He felt a burning desire to get down in there, to do something effective, to commit himself utterly. Then he remembered something. No, it wouldn't work—Sam had said there were no connections But it was at least worth investigating.

Back in the room, he searched round the back of the creatron, and found the instruction tapes. He had never played them right to the end: now he did so. And finally the robot voice said, tonelessly:

"Total Empathy Control. Extreme top right, coloured purple. Not. repeat not, to be touched unless an assistant is at hand to watch the brain monitor and if necessary to impose Hold and end the empathy.

"Total Empathy produces total illusion. The operator will lose all consciousness except the consciousness of the host-creature: subjectively, he will be that creature until the creature dies or until Hold is imposed. It is advised that the operator should select a host-creature which is in good health and safe from external dangers; and also arrange with the assistant to have the Hold control activated after a very limited period. The operator should also check that he himself is in perfect physical condition before attempting Total Empathy.

"Repeat: Total Empathy Control. Extreme top right, coloured purple . . ."

Jay switched off. Then he summoned his butler

"That metal cap," he said, pointing. "Can you remove it for me?"

"Certainly, sir," said the robot. He put his metal fingers to his metal chest, opened the small window there, and took out an instrument which had hardly changed in a thousand years—a screwdriver. Then he bent over the creatron. A minute later, the butler straightened. He was holding up a small rounded piece of metal.

"Order executed, sir."

"All right, now leave me," said Jay.

"Sir." The butler left.

There it was . . a purple button, no different in size or shape from many others on the great machine. It wouldn't work, of course, Jay told himself, but it might be a help psychologically. When he was in middle to deep empathy, and had selected a worthy host, he would press it, and then follow that man through his life of striving for justice and mercy. It would have to be someone like that great Enlightened One, but perhaps more active, more impassioned. Not in the East, not in Hellas. How about that little tribe in the area between, whose prophets had so long ago denounced sacrifice?

He pressed the Run button, and history resumed Jay located the tribe he wanted. They had passed through various tribulations, but they seemed to have emerged from them: and their faith was firmer than ever fixed in a just and merciful God. Now the Hellenes were expanding all over the middle of the planet, and they were lording it over that little tribe, too. They were trying to turn *them* into imitation Hellenes, acceptors of the world as it was, in all its sensuality and cruelty.

But the tribe resisted fiercely. Persecution merely spurred them on to greater efforts; and now the Hellenes were overthrown by a power from the West. These new overlords were a grimmer people. At first they favoured

the little tribe, but surely this could not last. For the newcomers, now a great Empire, were thoroughly infected by Hellene values. They were the biggest slave masters of all time, rich, arrogant, merciless. The massacre of the island town was repeated again and again, all round the coasts of that middle sea, until the Empire was unbeatable, and Jay was thoroughly sickened.

It was now late at night. He pressed the Hold button, went to his bed chamber, and did not sleep well.

Next morning he rose a little later than usual, had a light breakfast, and threw himself upon the creatron. He pressed the Run button, and found his favourite little tribe. Yes, it was as he had expected: they were seething with righteous anger against their masters, the holders of a cruel Empire.

And everywhere among them was the feeling: the hour is at hand.

On the bank of a river stood a wild man, a prophet. A stream of pilgrims was coming to him, and he was ducking them in the river, pouring water over their heads, in token of purification.

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" he cried.

Jay explored the prophet's personality. Fire, yes, and indignation, but a certain narrowness, a lack of balance. Could he not find . . .?

The next moment a pilgrim approached the river bank; a young man with a short neat beard and shoulder-length hair, poorly but cleanly dressed.

Jay did not need to explore. Already he felt the attraction, the greatness of soul, the burning pity.

He reached out his hand, and pressed the purple button.

The room was bright with light of Olympus' noon when they found him. Aphra was in the room a little ahead of Sam, and when she saw the inertness of the body stretched out on the machine, she uttered a shriek and rushed forward.

"Sam, he's bleeding!" she cried.

"Hope so," muttered Harriman. He ran to the right side of the creatron, and punched the Hold button. Then he turned to look at Jay.

Blood was running along his forearms. Aphra was feeling his chest, touching his lips.

"He's alive!" she whispered, brightening. "Oh, Sam, what happened?"

"I can guess," said Harriman grimly, looking at the exposed purple button. "Those idiot engineers assured me . . . but never mind that now. Let's get him off that, but carefully: he might have some bones broken. Damn lucky thing you insisted on coming today. I don't believe they even had anybody in the Corp watching the monitor. No, don't try to move him yet: I'll call the help."

The robots came, and following Sam's instructions got Jay onto a stretcher and finally onto the soft anti-grav bed. At this point he groaned, and opened his eyes.

"What . . . where . . ."

"Take it easy," said Harriman. "You'll be okay, Jay. You had a little accident, but we got here fast, you were much luckier than that guy Siris. You've got some wounds—the one in your side is the worst, but it seems to have missed all the vital organs. Don't talk yet. We'll get the auto-doc onto you in a couple of seconds, and then . . ."

They did just that. Jay's wounds healed in seconds, and after two minutes he was through the sedation period. He breathed deeply, and sat up.

"Okay, now, spill it," said Harriman, eyes wide and eager. "In one way, Jay, I'm glad this happened. We've never had such a chance before. no one who got into a really dangerous, physical-effects emergency in TE has lived to tell the tale. What did it seem was happening to you?"

Jay told them.

"Say!" breathed Harriman. "You know, that's one method I never dreamed up? Jay, you have the most *creative* ideas! Now, of course, I'll be able to use that in my

worlds. Pity it had to happen to *you*, though . . . subjectively, I mean. Well, I hope you've learnt your lesson. Mind you, I've already lased to the Corp and they've got a team in your Box room already. That purple button is coming off right now—that's as a public precaution. After that, if you like, we'll give you a new Box. We owe you at least that. After all, it was our carelessness that landed you in this mess."

"No," said Jay. He scrambled off the bed. "Tell your men to stop . . ."

He was rushing for the door. Harriman blocked his path.

"Take it easy. What . . ."

"I don't want them to erase my universe!"

"They won't," said Harriman. "That's your privilege. I guess you'd like to erase it slowly, beginning with those guys who . . ."

"No," said Jay, "I'm not going to erase it at all. I'm going to continue it. Oh, I won't try Total Empathy again . . . I don't need to. I know what it's like now to be a man in a world of pain and death and cruelty. I also know that you can't eliminate pain and death and cruelty—we haven't eliminated them even from *our* world—we've just tucked them away from our godlike selves, into such places as these box universes. The pain and the evil has to be, because pain sharpens pleasure, and evil brightens good. What's important, though, Sam," he said, looking at Harriman steadily, "is to know which side you're on."

From that day onwards, Jay's life on Olympus became more normal. He once more wrote for the kine screen; and the art circles hailed the appearance of a new master dramatist, no longer a writer of delicate little sketches, but a poet of such passion as had not been seen on Olympus before. Some of the Olympians were puzzled; but others acknowledged his greatness. Jay, in short, was a success; he was even popular socially.

And Aphra was once more sharing his bed.

"I like you *much* better than Sam," she said, with a shudder. "Jay, I had to find out the hard way. You know what? He's a *sadist*."

And Jay also spent many hours at his creatron, though he was no longer addicted to it. He watched the Empire crumble; and then, to his astonishment, he watched himself being hailed as a god, and a new sort of Empire rising in his own name. An Empire that paid lip-service to universal love and mercy, and at the same time embarked on crusades, on massacres of unbelievers and heretics.

Jay smiled sardonically, a little wearily. It was always the same story: all victories over cruelty quickly became cruel themselves . . .

And that new sort of Empire passed, too. Now the planet was split among several great nations, all making progress in physical science, all beginning to devastate their world.

"At this rate," thought Jay, "they'll soon be turning into *us*! Then who will be the gods, and who the creatures?"

From time to time, he had company at the guest-viewer; not Harriman now, but Aphra. Aphra hugely enjoyed all of Jay's world—she was the perfect audience. She loved the sinners as much as the saints, the villains as much as the virtuous. She had a special weakness for world-conquerors.

"Isn't he *cute*?" she breathed, gazing down on a young artillery officer who had made himself an Emperor, and was tumbling old kingdoms as fast as his men could march.

"Do you think he's cute *now*?" said Jay, as the great army died in the snow, while the Emperor fled at top speed for his distant capital.

Aphra tossed her yellow locks.

"Not any more," she admitted. "Besides, he's *middle-aged*, and getting a paunch. The young Emperor on the other side, though, and that funny stiff general, they're really fun!"

Jay smiled. He was getting used to Aphra's point of view, as she presided like a spirit of beauty over his world. Yes, pain and evil had to be there: and many of the beasts of prey had a certain terrible beauty—even the human ones. You still had to choose goodness, but you could choose it whole-heartedly only because goodness could never win out completely. And so the great game went on . . .

Did this make perfect sense? He wasn't sure. At times he thought it did, but at other times he was overwhelmed by the mystery of it all.

And he still sought for wisdom among his sub-people on the blue and white planet. Their science was crude, but their philosophy and theology often quite subtle. They had a good deal to say about *Jay's* nature—things that thoroughly surprised him.

Finally, nearly two thousand years of sub-time after the accident with the purple button, a new idea had arisen among the philosophers and the churches. In medium empathy, Jay entered the minds of his former worshippers, and heard them think it and say it. Gravely they repeated: "*God is dead!*"

Jay smiled as he pressed the Hold button.

"How wrong they are," he murmured to Aphra, "luckily for them! But it's true, they and I had a close shave, once . . ."

COMING BACK

by Damien Broderick

Yes, by now he admits that Jennifer is not deliberately driving him crazy. Quit laying it on her, Rostow chides himself. His Bastilled lunacy is self evidently self-inflicted. There can be no doubt, as Tania had always insisted, that his is a personality gruesomely at risk, pumping through spasms of mania and depression, elation and reproach. As he glances up, the bulwarks of censure shear free of their hinges. The three coil techs share his appreciation with ogles and grins.

Descending the worn rubber treads of the catwalk, its non-magnetic structure faintly creaking and spronging in ludicrous counterpoint, Jennifer's legs are golden with undepilated summer hairs. He will certainly lose his reason. It is her innocent, unconscious hauteur which propels Rostow's intolerable aspirations

Who would believe that less than three weeks ago, governed by hard liquor and soft drugs, his hands had crept like pussycats over those shins, pounced past her knees to her thighs and beyond, dextrous Auberon Mountbatten Singh, D.Sc, coolly working all the while at the far end of her torso with mysterious expertise, soothing her brow, the edges of her jaw, the latent weakness at her throat, the revealed swell of her breasts? Even at this moment Rostow can scarcely credit his role in that maniacal and tasteless contest. Was it a contest? As

she steps from the catwalk to her computer terminal, Rostow groans in self-rebuke.

If even once she took stock, fixed him with, say, a single killing glance of rejection . . . that would put an end to it. He might flail himself definitively and be done. Instead, she moves with languid competence in his marginal survival spaces like a neutrino beam wafting through a mountain of solid lead.

'Hi," she offers, settling herself in a moulded seat. Her gaze penetrates him for an instant, moving after a beat to her keyboard. 'Stan's on his way with the entire entourage. I spied.'

'Jambo,' says Rostow. It's all there, bolted into his larynx. Dutifully he runs the coded sequence of knobs and toggles which shunts the system from Latent to Standby. He nods to the departing technicians. There is a Parkinsonian tremor in his stupid fingers. 'Pouring spirits down their throats. Softening them up.'

Neat square indicators simmer vividly as the control instrumentation, swift bleats from his console to hers and back, patch into readiness. 'This little number should sober them,' she observes. '"Jambo"?'

'Swahili for "Hello, sailor".' A thread of mush in his voice and his brain tells his ear that the inflexion was wrong. I blew it. Every time I blow it. With a mental fist he clouts his forehead. There is no time for limping second guesses. Stan Donaldson's abrasive voice precedes the man by half a second as the door swings wide for the expensive feet of the Board of Directors.

'We acquired it from Princeton, senator,' the department head is saying. 'ERDA paid out a quarter of a billion dollars for a Tokamak Fusion Test Reactor that was obsoleted overnight when Sandia secured sustained fusion by inertial confinement.'

It seems to Rostow, squinting from the side of his eye and jittery with alarm, that this approach is a mistake. The senator is notorious for his loathing of costly obsolescence. Uh-huh. Buonacelli halts in mid-stride,

pokes a finger into Donaldson's chubby chest. 'Another son-of-a bitch Ivy League boondoggle. That's the kind of crap I won't abide.'

Donaldson stands his ground. His own rasp is melodic after the senator's gravel.

'Their blunder was our good fortune, sir,' he says 'They were going to haul off the toroidal coils for recycling, but I managed to have them diverted to this laboratory. Everything is surplus or off-the-shelf.'

Somewhat mollified, Buonacelli pushes forward to loom over Jennifer Barton's supervisor terminal, his minnows in attendance 'I'm still goddamned if I know what your magnets are for. The trustees won't be slow to scrap any project that smacks of self-indulgent tinkering.' The set of his agribiz frame shows approval of Jennifer at least 'Convince us, and fast. This is the third department we've been dragged through today, and my feet are killing me.'

'Miss Barton, could you fetch the senator a chair?'

Incredulous on her behalf, Rostow burns Buonacelli holds the woman's biceps as she rises. 'That's fine, honey, I'll stand.' An arm goes around her shoulders in a friendly squeeze nobody in their right mind could construe as avuncular Eddie Rostow damages his tooth enamel 'Don't bother buttering me up, Dr Donaldson Let's get straight to the meat What does this pile of junk do? Why do you deserve a couple more megabucks?'

Rostow's chagrin changes to delight as Stan's moist, unhealthy jowls darken. No doubt this will be the third or fourth time Donaldson has tried to explain the advanced wave mirror to the accountants. Probably, Eddie decides, Buonacelli is just baiting him The old bastard may know zilch about high energy physics but he's nobody's fool

It would serve Donaldson right if they haven't followed a word he's been saying The man revels in pretentious jargon Rostow hears a scurry of furry feet in the cardboard box near his own, cranes his neck, breaks up in silent mirth. The white bunny rabbit in the box is making

its own critical observations. Cottontail high, it's dropping a stream of dry pellets into the shredded lettuce that litters the box.

Florid, Stan has decided to simplify his spiel. He's saying: 'A totally new branch of technology, gentlemen. Perhaps my previous remarks were overly technical.'

'New like Princeton?'

'New like Sandia,' the professor says, grasping thankfully at the straight line. 'Yet thoroughly rooted in classical theory. What we have here, gentlemen, is the answer to a puzzle provoked by James Clerk Maxwell more than a century ago. Maxwell,' he glosses, 'was the genius who first showed that electricity and magnetism were one and the same. His equations are the basis of all electronic technology.'

'For history we fund historians,' one of the committee says coldly, currying favour, but recoils when Buonacelli growls.

Emboldened, the great physicist states loftily: 'Physics is precisely the accumulated history of great physicists. My point, senator, is that Maxwell's equations for electromagnetic wave motion have two sets of solutions. One set describes what we term *retarded* waves, where fluctuations are broadcast outward due to the acceleration of a charged particle. Radio waves from a transmitter are retarded waves, akin to the ripples from a stone dropped in a pond.'

Rostow monitors surges of power in the system, holding it in equilibrium. He seeks Jennifer Barton's eye, hoping for a shared long-suffering grimace, but her attention is directed to the listening senator.

Donaldson is creeping into pomposity again. 'The other solutions, equally valid in theoretical terms, we call *advanced* waves. Until now they have never been detected, let alone utilized.'

'Radio waves get drawn back into a transmitter?' Buonacelli poses acutely, puzzled.

'Exactly.' Donaldson rewards him with a satisfied pout.

'Advanced waves converge to a point. Another way of looking at it is to say that they travel backwards in time. They put time into reverse. Normally, for complex reasons, the two sets of waves interfere, yielding no more than the retarded component. What I've done here with this equipment—'

Unnoticed, Eddie Rostow sits bolt upright and his face distorts in a throttled shriek. What *you've* done, you thieving son-of-a-bitch?

But Buonacelli's scandalized roar has filled the lab. Suddenly it is obvious that indeed he had not grasped the earlier explanations. 'Who in hell do you think you are, professor—H.G. Wells? Don't you ever learn? How dare you stand there and tell us you've been spending the university's endowment on a *time* machine?'

As Rostow spins in his chair, the dignitaries are stomping toward the door. Before Donaldson finds words, Jennifer Barton has slipped into Buonacelli's path. 'Surely you're not leaving yet, Senator? Won't you at least wait for the demonstrations we've prepared for you?' She blinks as if something is in her eye.

'Harrumph!' Buonacelli lifts her hands in his beefy paws. 'I don't know how they've taken you in, my dear. Never trust a scientist. If they're not lunatics, they're swindlers. Either way, it's a waste of good tax revenue.'

'Why, senator! I'm a scientist myself.'

He releases one hand, strokes his jaw. 'My apologies, dear lady. To tell the truth, my eldest son is a chemist at Dow.' Gallantly he bows, retaining one of her hands. 'Very well, gentlemen. To please this charming lady, let's take a look at the professor's so-called demonstration.'

Wincing, Rostow spins quickly back to his station. He knows he'll be the butt of Stan's fuming humiliation the moment the directors are on their way. Why do I put up with it?

Tersely, the professor tells Buonacelli, 'You may examine this equipment thoroughly.' He leads them to the mirror chamber buried between gigantic doughnut-

shaped magnets, slides open the ceramic hatch. With heavy sarcasm he says, 'Assure yourselves it's quite empty. There are no hidden trapdoors or disappearing rabbits.' Rostow swallows a snigger, his eye on the white bunny munching in its box between his feet. Poor little beast, he thinks an instant later. I hate that part of it. But it's going to rock Buonacelli on his heels and open his wallet.

'Advanced waves are generated in every molecular interaction. Within these confines they are reflected almost totally. The crystalline surface of the chamber constitutes an array of laser-like amplifiers which augment the advanced-wave component.' My idea, Eddie Rostow wants to shout. Without that you'd have a big magnetic field going absolutely nowhere. But whose name will go on the paper? He says nothing. Donaldson puts his head inside the chamber. Dully, as he twists back and forth, his muffled voice states. 'As you see, it's perfectly safe at the moment.' An almost irresistible impulse floods Rostow Regretfully, he pulls his finger back from the power switches.

'Okay,' growls Buonacelli, 'it's empty. So?'

Jennifer Barton leaves her terminal and returns with a flask of boiling water in one hand and a tray of ice-cubes in the other.

'This will be simple but graphic, senator,' she says. It is Stan's notion of theatrics to have her fetch the props. 'As you can see, this water is very hot. Would you care to dip in your pinky to test it, sir?'

'Thank you, honey, but I guess I recognize hot water when I see it.'

A crony adds, unnecessarily, 'You've been in plenty of it in your time.' Everyone laughs ingratiatingly. Jenny drops two large ice-cubes into the flask, places it inside the chamber. She goes at once to her terminal, and her features blank out in the inert Zen concentration of perfect egoless programming. The assembled company stare foolishly at the sight of two ice-cubes slowly dissolving. Donaldson dogs the hatch. An enhanced but

rudimentary image of the interior comes to life on an adjacent TV screen. It shows two ice-cubes slowly dissolving.

'Ideally,' the professor says, fists clenched at his sides, 'the chamber would be absolutely shielded. We've sacrificed some signal purity so you can see what's going on inside. The process will still work reasonably well. Is the system on-line, Eddie?'

'Yeah.' Rostow's own palms are wet. The whole performance is premature. Five successful tests and two fails. Donaldson's a yo-yo, bobbing from an obsession for publicity at any cost through close-mouthed paranoia and back. It'd almost be nice if the damned thing blew out. Bite your tongue. It's my baby. Go, go.

'Well, don't just sit there.'

'Right, Stan,' says Rostow through his teeth, and smashes the toggle closed.

There is no new sound, no deep shuddering hum or rising whine. Current in the magnetic coils goes to fifty thousand amps, and there is a faint creaking as monstrously thick non-magnetic steel structural members crave one another's company in the embrace of the stupendous field. Sometimes, the lights dimmed, Rostow has seen phantom bars of pale light crossing his line of sight. Field strengths of this magnitude can screw with the visual cortex. Or maybe the magnets bend cosmic radiation through the soft tissues of his eyeballs and brain, nibbling tiny explosions of pseudolight in his synapses. It isn't happening now. Everyone stares at the TV monitor, waiting for something apocalyptic. Caught by the mood, Rostow abandons his console and steals across to join them.

'I'm still waiting,' Buonaceth barks.

'Watch the ice-cubes, senator,' Jennifer tells him.

'Dear God.' It is one of the accountants who first grasps what is happening. 'The bastards are getting bigger!'

'Just so,' Donaldson says, loosening his fists. 'The basic conservation law: heat can't pass from a cold object to a

hot one. But time inside the mirror is now running backwards, gentlemen, for all practical purposes. Advanced Maxwell radiation, amplified by the lasing action, is converging on the flask. The Second Law of Thermodynamics is repealed.'

Rostow's body thumps to his pulse. Steam is rising once more from the flask A pair of unblemished cubes jounce at the surface of the boiling water.

'Fantastic,' Buonacelli groans. 'I take it all back. Dr Donaldson, this is the wonder of the age.'

'You have yet to witness the more dramatic part of our demonstration ' Turning abruptly, the professor stumbles into Rostow. 'Wouldn't it be better if you were at your console, Eddie? Please power the system down immediately and put it on Standby. Where's that animal?'

Rostow chews at part of his face. 'I'll get him for you.' He slouches in his seat, runs the current down, feels in the box with his left hand for the bunny. Helplessly he glances at Jennifer Barton. She is watching him. Fingers tight around the bunny's ears, he hoists it from the box and feels sick as he identifies the flash of emotion in her face.

Taking the bunny, Donaldson suggests: 'Remove the flask and then stand by for my mark.' Rostow seethes, but welcomes the distraction. Behind him the bunny squeals Nothing wrong with its memory at any rate. There's a meaty thunk. One of the accountants, no great white hunter, is averting squeamish eyes. Buonacelli's are narrowed in wild surmise.

Resurrection is at once prosaic, electrifying, impossible to comprehend. On the raster-crossed black and white monitor, the bunny's grainy sopping fur lightens as untold trillions of randomly bustling molecules reverse their paths As the flow staunches, its poor partitioned head rolls upward from the glass bowl and fits itself seamlessly to its unmarked neck. Prestidigitation. The bunny blinks spasmodically, slow lids snapping upward, wiggles his nose, and disgorges a strip of unchewed lettuce. The lab thunders crazily with applause.

'You're a genius!' Hue has drained from Buonacelli's seamed features; it surges back, as he beats Donaldson's shoulders 'Reviving the dead . . .' He pauses and adds slowly, with avaracious appetite: 'A man could live forever.'

'I doubt it,' Rostow tells him. 'We can put people back together, and heal wounds. But unfortunately it won't help those who die of natural causes.'

'Rejuvenate them!'

'It'll rub out your memory.'

'Not your financial holdings, by God.' The senator flexes his fingers, thickened by incipient arthritis. 'Plenty of memories I could happily live without. You could brief yourself leave notes, tapes . . .'

'Sorry. Reversed time passes at the conventional rate. Do you want to spend forty years in solitary confinement? Besides, even the immensely rich couldn't run this machine non-stop for that long.'

Donaldson is nodding his agreement, until it occurs to him that he's no longer the centre of attention. 'I did ask you to stay at your console, Eddie. Miss Barton, thank you. that will be all today.' With smiles all around, he ushers the committee members away from the mirror into a cosy space of his own contriving. Eddie Rostow watches them troop toward the door. They remain in shock, their several minds no doubt working like maniacs as each tries to figure himself in and the rest out. 'Truly astounding,' one says as the door closes.

Rostow covers his face. In the huge empty lab he hears Jennifer Barton rise from her seat He opens his fingers for a peek. She is regarding him across her deactivated terminal; he cannot read her expression with certainty. Once more he covers his eyes and listens to the tap of her shoes, the click of her exit. Wistfully he sniffs the air for a trace of her scent, more natural pheromone than applied cosmetic. On the monitor screen, the bunny is scratching at the walls of the mirror chamber. Poor little beast. Dazed by anger, lust, remorse and sympathy, Rostow strides to

the chamber and plucks the bunny to freedom and mortality.

A dizzying aura of bloody light spangled with pinpoints of imploding radiance momentarily blinds him.

'Cretin,' he mouths, dropping the rabbit and slamming the hatch. He runs toward the console, clutching his eyes, and barks his shin on the back of his chair.

Nothing explodes. When his vision clears he scans the bank of square lights on the system he had left running at full power without computer supervision. Christ Almighty, we need a fail-safe on that. Who'd expect anyone to be so dumb? Shuddering, he runs through the step-down with scrupulous attention to detail, double-checking every item.

As he finishes, he notes the bunny lumping near his numb toes, trying to get back into its box. The stupid bastard is hungry again. He heaves it in.

The afternoon is only half done. This is insane. Did Roentgen finish off his full day's work after the first exhibition of X-rays? Surely Watson and Crick didn't quietly mop up the lab after they'd confirmed the DNA helix. I'll take myself off and tie one on, he decides. I'll get drunk as a skunk. He'd done just that after the first successful trial of the advanced-wave mirror: by himself, bound to secrecy by his nervous department head, he'd sat in a downtown bar and poured bourbon into his belly until the trembling urge to howl with joy dopplered into a morose blur. And paid for it next day. Oh, no, not that again. I'll march down to Jennifer's room and lay it all out for her. Invite her to a movie, a plate of *Fricassée de Poulet* at Chez Marius and a bottle or two of Riesling. We'll get smashed together, bemoan Donaldson's bastardry; hell, we'll leave Donaldson out of it; we'll go to her apartment and screw our tiny pink arses off.

His hand had been all the way up her skirt, and the next day she'd acted as if nothing had ever passed between them. Did goddamned Auberon Mountbatten Singh have his evil Anglo-Indian way with her that night, rotating

through ingenious positions? It doesn't bear thinking about.

For a moment, to his horror, Rostow finds himself regretting his divorce. Worse, he finds his baffled free-floating lust drifting in the direction of the image of his ex-wife. Swiftly he puts a stop to that.

With effort he levers up from the dead console and mooches to the foot of the catwalk, leaning on its handrail. I have to stop brooding about Jennifer. I could have killed myself shoving my hand into the powered mirror, through the temporal interface. I do not interest her strangely. Undoubtedly only fantastic self-restraint prevented her from smashing my jaw with her knee. My God, how can I look her in the eye?

This kind of maundering unreels through Rostow's head until he is so bored with it that he turns back to check the data for tomorrow's log of tests. Glancing at the wall clock, he sees that he's wasted half an hour in useless self-laceration. Maybe, after all, he should simply run out the door, burst into her office, and screw her until the sweat pops from her admiring brow. Oh my God. He drags a heavy, battered mathematical cookbook from the bench where the bunny rabbit was murdered and resigns himself to the honourable discharge of his employment. A dizzying aura of bloody light spangled with pinpoints of imploding radiance momentarily blinds him.

'Cretin,' he mouths, dropping the rabbit and slamming the hatch. He runs toward the console, clutching his eyes, and barks his shins on the back of his chair.

Nothing explodes. A startled, unconvinced element in his mind asks itself: Hasn't this all happened before?

He notes the bunny lumping near his numb toes trying to get back into its box. The stupid bastard is—

Oh, Jesus. A small disjointed part of him watches the wind-up golem, as detached as the bunny's head after its sacrifice. This isn't *déjà vu*. It's too sustained. I'll take myself off and tie one on, he decides. I'll get drunk as a skunk. Oh my God, I'm tracking through the same

temporal sequence twice. But that's truly insane, delusional. Time isn't repeating itself. I'm using the advanced-wave mirror system as a metaphor, at some cracked-up level of my unconscious. Didn't my dear sweet brilliant wife complain that I'm a cyclothymic personality, a marginal manic-depressive, obsessively driven to repeat my laments? I've careened into a rut. A conditioned habit of thought. Jennifer Barton is driving me nuts. I can't even see her in the same room without brooding on the same regrets and fantasies. I'll march down to Jennifer's room and lay it all out for her. Invite her to a movie, a plate of *Fricassée de—*

All his sensations are scrambled. The terror in his head clangs against the lugubrious mood of his hormones. I looked at the clock, he tells himself desperately, clutching for a falsifiable test. Sound scientific method. What did it say? 4:37? Last time round. He grips that single datum, while his mutinous corpse leans on the railing of the catwalk, one foot propped on a rubber tread. Glancing at the wall clock, he sees that he's wasted half an hour—

Oh God Almighty. 4:37. Exultation bursts in his mind, leaving his flesh to plod like lead. Hold it, that doesn't mean you haven't flipped your cranium. Everyone has a built-in clock. Three Major Biorhythms Ordain Your Fate, that sort of thing. He wants to giggle, but his chest and jaw don't respond to the wish. His frail flesh has resigned itself to the honourable discharge of his employment. A dizzying aura of bloody light spangled with pinpoints of imploding radiance momentarily blinds him.

No! the small anarchic part screams silently. I can't stand it. It's happening again. I'm stuck in a loop of time. Wait, I can prove it. I dropped the rabbit. Any moment now I'll glance down and see it . . .

. . . trying to get back into its box. The stupid bastard is hungry again. He heaves it in —

Rostow tells himself: this is the third time round. Or is it? Were he in control of his programmed muscles, he would shudder. Maybe I've been caught in this loop for all

eternity, or at any rate long enough for random quantum variations in one part of my brain to set up an isolated observing subprogram. Jesus, how much pseudo-duration would that take? Ludwig Bolzmann's *Stossahlansatz* postulate: ordered particles spontaneously decay into chaos, but given enough interactions they can swirl together again into a new order, or even the old order. Suppose I'm at the bottom of a local fluctuation from unordered equilibrium. What's the Poincare recurrence time for a human being and his lab? Say ten to the tenth power raised to the thirtieth power. That's *absolutely* grotesque. The entire universe would have evaporated into dead cold soot. So I'm re-cycling. I stuck my mitt in the hatch and screwed up the mirror. I'm looping through the same thirty minutes forever, knowing exactly what's due next and unable to do anything about it. Maybe I'm not crazy—but I will be soon.

I'm a prisoner, Rostow realizes, in my own past.

For a moment, to his horror, he finds himself regretting his divorce. Worse, he finds

Hold it, the isolated segment thinks. If I'm patched into the lasing system, the additional mass of my body is pushing the mirror into a singularity on an asymptotic curve, tending to the limit at thirty-odd minutes duration. But Hawking has shown that quantum effects re-enter powerfully under such conditions. After all, Rostow debates with himself, they must, or I'd be unaware of what's happening. The human brain has crucial quantum scale interactions. Weren't Popper and Eccles arguing that case for years? So maybe I can break free of my prior actions. What's to stop me *deciding* to cross the room and pick up the flask from the bench where I put it?

Jenny, you bitch, he thinks, why are you doing this to me? Bitterly, he wanders to the bench and lifts the lukewarm flask of melted ice-cubes to his lips. It tastes terrible. He puts it down with revulsion, then picks it up once more and stares in amazement. I'm not thirsty. Something *made* me do that—

—the flask slips out of his fingers and shatters. The twin sectors of consciousness fuse.

Eddie Rostow goes stealthily to his console chair and lowers himself with infinite delicacy.

Aloud, he mutters 'I'm not out of it yet. Or am I? Is one change in the cause-and-effect sequence sufficient to take me off the loop?' Mellowing afternoon light slants across his fists from the barred skylight, a sympathetic doubling to the shadow from harsh white fluoros, and his voice echoes wanly. Rostow flushes. If Donaldson comes through that door to hear him mumbling to himself . .

But that isn't on the agenda, is it? If anyone in the entire world has a certified lease on his own immediate future, it's Edward Theodore Rostow, doctoral candidate and imbecile. The conjecture has come belatedly on tiptoes to smash him behind the ear. With a glad cry he leaps to his feet 'I can do anything! *Anything* I wish!'

I'm not trapped. I thought I was a prisoner, but I'm the first man in history to be genuinely liberated. Set free from consequences Do it. If you don't like the results, scrub it on the next cycle and try again.

Rostow grabs up paper and calculator, scrawls figures. Start by establishing the exact parameters See if the loop is decaying or elongating. It's aggravating, but he rounds out the cycle with his eyes clamped to the clock. The bloody aura flashes a half minute after the digital clock jumps to 4 37. With iron control he keeps hold of the rabbit and wrenches his head around as vision clears Three minutes after four. His endocrine fluids are telling him to panic, sluggishly stuck in the original sequence. Rostow's excited mind shouts them down Denying the inertia of previous events, he takes the wriggling bunny to his console and places it carefully in its cardboard home. A thirty-four minute loop.

Considerable effort is required initially Rostow's First Theorem, he thinks, grinning. Any action will continue to be repeated indefinitely unless a volitional force is applied to counter that action. Fortunately the energy necessary

to alter intention and will is in the microvolt range. Yes. The brain is a quantum machine for making choices, once you understand that choice is possible.

He halts with his hand on the door latch. Think this through. Stan Donaldson, esteemed head of department and professor, is the last son-of-a-bitch who deserves to know. Will I fall off the loop if I wander away from the mirror? Leaving the loop is suddenly a most undesirable prospect. Some obscure prompting dispels these trepidations. Rostow opens the door and enters the long colourless corridor.

Led by bombastic Donaldson, the Board of Directors is taking the stairs to the free hooch. Jennifer Barton's thick mane swirls as she shakes her head, freeing her arm from the senator's grip. On the bottom step she pivots and turns right, toward her small office in the Software Centre. Not celebrating? Eddie shuts the lab door and pursues her down the corridor.

I can't tell her about it. She'd be obliged to call for the men in white. Up ahead, she slips into her office without looking in his direction. Arousal stirs in him, fecklessly.

Not truly believing it, he reminds himself: Anything is possible. There are no payoffs. The world's a stage, tra la. 'I'll just lay it on the line,' he mutters seriously. A passing student blinks at him. With an inane giggle, Rostow nods. Loudly, in a crisp tone, he tells the student: 'I'll ask her what the hell it is between us.' 'Oh,' says the student, and walks on, swivelling his brows.

Out of his gourd on freedom unchecked by restraint, Rostow zooms toward joy with the woman of his dreams. In a magical slalom on the vinyl tiles, he bursts through Jennifer Barton's door and thrusts his hands onto the desk's edge. Her lab coat lies on a filing cabinet; she stands at her window, brushing her hair. 'Tell me, for Christ's sake,' Eddie barks before his vocabulary can freeze up, 'what the hell it is between us.'

His secret sweetheart narrows her eyes. With deflated, acute perception, Rostow surmises that perhaps he is not

her secret sweetheart. 'I hate it with the rabbit,' she tells him, putting the brush in a drawer. 'But it was a sensational *coup de théâtre*. Coming up for a drink?'

"Didn't you notice? I wasn't invited.'

'Surely it was understood.' She is being patient with him. Rostow closes the door at his back and sits on the desk. Stress is winding him tight Has the stoned euphoria gone already?

'Jennifer,' he says.

She waits. Then she rolls the castor-footed chair forward, sits before her impressive stacks of hard copy, and waits some more.

'Look. Jennifer, something went wrong with my upbringing. The only time I'm fluent is when I'm smashed, and then I turn into the maddened wolfman. So I don't go out very often. For example. Six months ago, after a horrible divorce, I ventured to a party without a keeper. Nobody tied me up or shoved a gag in my face. I failed conspicuously to recognize an old acquaintance, and then hectored him about the polarity of his sexual cravings. In the crudest possible terms. With no provocation, I noisily engaged a stern feminist on the matter of her tits, which I found noteworthy. I ended by shouting in a proprietorial manner from one end of the host's house to the other, at three in the morning, inviting young bearded people and their companions to drink up and depart swiftly, in what seemed to me a hearty and engaging fashion. When I got home I fell down in my own puke.'

After a further silence, Jennifer lights a cigarette. 'How horrible.'

'Doubtless I'm a horrible person in every respect.'

'That's not what I meant.'

Rostow starts to yell, then lowers his voice in confusion. 'I stumble over you sprawled on a fat bean-bag in the middle of a room of colleagues and strangers having your tits massaged by a swarthy blackamoor –'

She's on her feet. 'Okay. Enough. Out.' Eddie is taken aback at the power of her extended arm as she hoists him

off the desk. He thumps down heavily, barring the door with one leg.

'No, God damn it. So I sit down beside you and toy with your wonderfully hairy leg. You smile and extend your limbs. I can't believe it. Up goes my little hand, hoppity-scamp—'

'Shut up, you creep.'

For this, Rostow is utterly unprepared. He gapes.

Jennifer refuses to lower her eyes. Blotches of colour stand out on her cheekbones. 'You're right, Rostow, you are a horrible person. Incredibly enough, I once found you rather piquant. Your crass behaviour the other night might have been forgivable as whimsy.' In authentic rage she clamps her teeth together and wrenches the door open. 'Stay or go as you please.' Then the room is vacant, and Rostow slumps on the desk with his guts spilling out of his wounds and his brain whirling into sawdust and aloes.

The bloody aura is a jolt from one awful dream to another. With iron control he keeps hold of the rabbit and wrenches his head around as vision clears. Three minutes after four. Yet the appalling encounter echoes like a double image, a triple image in fact. His chemistry overloads and he vomits uncontrollably. Finally sourness sweeps away hallucination, he totters to the console and runs the mirror system down to Latent.

Aghast, he tells himself. 'Scrub it out. Make it didn't happen.' Regressing to childhood. His mouth tastes repulsive; he wipes his lips on the back of his hand. I can't take much more of this, he thinks. The human frame wasn't meant to handle the strain of dual sets of information. It'd take a Zen *roshi* to cope with this weirdness. The bitch, the lousy bitch.

But it isn't Jennifer Barton's doing. Rostow is doomed by his oafishness. I've got to keep away from her. I'd shred myself into a million messy bits. It is clear, though, that he cannot cower forever in the lab with only a resurrected rabbit for company. Enough, he tells himself. Out. The clock shows a quarter after four. Cyclic time is slipping

away. Down the corridor, unharassed, Jennifer Barton is presumably finalizing her coiffure.

Rostow slams the door, running for the stairs. As he expects, Buonacelli and his clique are milling in the Senior Faculty Bar. Donaldson dispenses whiskies in their midst, jovial, exonerated, cautioning them all to reticence under the rubric of security.

'A wonderful experience, Dr, uh, Rostow?' says one of the directors, a pleasant administrator. Eddie turns convulsively 'I'm Harrison MacIntyre, Ford Foundation.' The man holds out his hand. 'No problems with funding,' he smiles, 'after today.'

'Oh. Thank you. Not "doctor," I'm afraid. I've never had time to write anything up.' Stan seems to be explaining how the advanced-wave project sprang fully armed from his professorial brow. Adrenalin begins a fresh surge. MacIntyre puts liquor into his hand and asks, 'I've been wondering about that. Publication, I mean. Surely today wasn't your first trial with the equipment?'

'No. No, Harrison. Call me Eddie. We knew it was going to work. It's been operational for some weeks.' Across the russet carpet, Buonacelli is laughing boomingly. 'The Nobel prize for Physics, Stan,' says the senator. 'The Nobel Prize for Medicine,' adds a beaming director. 'Hot damn,' cries another 'they'll make it a hat trick and give you the Nobel Prize for Literature when your paper comes out.'

Rostow scowls hideously. 'Normally we would indeed have published by now, Harrison,' he says loudly 'But after the tachyon fiasco, Professor Donaldson developed some misgivings about shooting his mouth off prematurely you see.' Faces turn. 'You must remember, 1975 wasn't it? Every man and his beagle was hunting faster than-light particles The great physicist spied his chance at glory.' The Ford Foundation man, scandalized, tries to hush him. Eddie drains his glass, gestures for another. 'But the professor blew it. His tachyons were actually pickup calls from the Green Cab Company. They snuck in through his Faraday cage. Someone didn't check that out until

after the press conference did we, Stan?'

Donaldson is peering at the half-full glass in Rostow's grasp; slowly, he allows his gaze to rise until he studies a point somewhere near Eddie's left ear. 'Mr Rostow,' he says from the depths of his soul, 'hired hands are rarely invited into this room. Those who gain that privilege generally comport themselves with civility and a due measure of deference. Those who have just been fired without a reference do not linger here under any circumstances. Get out of my sight.'

Jennifer Barton arrives at that moment, smiling, hair lustrous. At the door she hesitates, scanning shocked faces. Then eyes meet. Her presence – oblivious of edited outrage, witness to new humiliation – sends Rostow into a frenzy. He throws down his glass and catches Donaldson by his lapels.

'I wish you wouldn't shout, Frogface,' he says, every sinew on fire. 'You astounding hypocrite,' he says, ousting the man back on his heels. 'What's a Nobel Prize or two between hired hands?' he says, thumping Donaldson heavily in the breast. Two or three of the directors have come to their senses by now and grapple with Rostow, dragging him away from his gasping and empurpled victim. 'It happens all the time, doesn't it?' Eddie squirms, kicking at targets of opportunity. 'We poor bastards break our arses so some ludicrous discredited figurehead can whiz off to Stockholm to meet the king.'

Even in his own ears, Rostow's outburst sounds thin, thin. Where righteousness should ring, only stale peevishness lingers. He breaks free and pushes through business suits. Jennifer stares at him, off balance. 'You don't want to stay with these vultures,' he cries, seizing her arm. It seems that she studies his scarlet face for minutes of silence. With a minimal movement she dislodges his hand.

'Eddie,' she says regretfully, 'when are you going to grow up?'

Bitch. Bitch, bitch.

And the bloody aura. He is holding the rabbit,

wrenching his head around to check the clock. This time the shock of recurrence is curiously attenuated, as if lunatic hostility sits better than misery with a physiology keyed to fright. Rostow's heart rattles, catches its beat; the pulse thunders in his neck and wrists. The rabbit struggles free. He moves with Tarquin's ravishing stride to the console, at a pitch of emotion. Icily he shuts down the mirror system. There are cracks in the concrete where the supports for the magnetic coils are embedded. A faint regular buzzing comes from the fluoros. His skin is crawling, as if each hair on his body is a nipple, erect and preternaturally sensitive. Gagging, he closes the door and paces remorselessly down the corridor.

Jennifer Barton stands on the bottom step of the carved stairs, deflecting Senator Buonacelli's horseplay. Rostow storms past them. 'Hey, boy, that was a great show,' cries the senator. 'Why don't you and this little lady come up and join us in a drink?' Rostow hardly hears the man. His feet are at the ends of his legs. Jennifer's door is not locked. He leaves it wide for her, staring out into the afternoon light. Three tall blacks fake and run, dribbling a ball.

'Well, Jambo!' As Eddie faces her, Jennifer is closing the door, meeting him with an infectious smile. 'It's taken you long enough to find my office, sailor.'

'What?' he says, uncomprehending. He pushes her roughly back against the crowded desk and takes her thigh with cruel pressure. Speechless and instantly afraid, she repudiates his hand. He thrusts it higher and tugs at her underwear.

'Let's pick up where we left off,' he informs her. An absolute chill pervades his flesh. Nothing has prepared him to expect this of himself. Everything he calls himself is outraged, shrunken in loathing at his own actions.

'Stop it,' she says distantly. 'You fucking arsehole.' Tactically her posture is not favourable; when she drives up her right knee, its bruising force is deflected from his leg. I can have whatever I want. The whole universe is a

scourge slashing at my vulnerable back. Very well, let those be the rules. He imagines he is laughing. I have nothing to offer but fear itself. As she begins to scream and batter his neck, his cheek, his temple, he clouts her savagely into semiconsciousness. Oh, Jesus, you can't be blamed for what happens during a nightmare. In the absence of causality, Feodor, all things are permitted. She is bent backward, moving feebly One of his hands clamps her mouth, hard against her teeth, the other unzips. I'm the Primary Process Man, oh, wow. But he is so cold. There is no blood under his skin. Rostow batters at her thighs with his limp flesh. He slides to his knees. The edge of the desk furrows his nose.

'You,' Jenny grunts. She is blank with detestation. Tenderly, she touches her skull. 'You.'

Eddie Rostow lurches upright. Swaying, exposed, he falls into the corridor. The same young student, returning, regards him with astonishment and abhorrence. The boy reaches out a hand, changes his mind and pelts away in search of aid It is all a grainy picture show, a world-sized monitor screen. They'll fire him for this Oh, shit, Jenny, you don't understand, I *love* you.

In fugue, Rostow pitches down the corridor.

The cleaver is lying where Donaldson left it on the bench, a ripple of bunny blood standing back from its surgical edge. Rostow's self-contempt has no bounds. As he lifts the blade, there is one final lucid thought. I'm an animal, he tells himself. We can't be trusted The cleaver's handle slips in his sweating fingers. He tightens his grip and with a kind of concentration brings the thing in a whirling silvery arc into the tilted column of his neck. Shearing through the heavy sternomastoid muscle, in one blow it slashes the carotid artery, the internal jugular and the vagus nerve, before it's stopped by the banded cartilage of the trachea. He scarcely feels his flesh open. all pain is in the intolerable impact. A brilliant crimson jet spears and spatters. He collapses in shock, and the fluid pulses out of his torpid body until he is dead.

His corpse lies cooling until half a minute after 4:37.

A dizzying aura of bloody light spangled with pinpoints of imploding radiance momentarily blinds him.

Rostow screams.

There is nothing banal in this plunge upward into instantaneous rebirth. It is overwhelming. It is transcendental. It is a jackhammer on Rostow's soul.

Like a thousand micrograms of pure acid, life detonates every cell of his brain and body. He has been to hell, and died afterwards. Let me stay dead. Let me be dead.

Catharsis purges him of every thought. Eddie cradles the white rabbit in his arms and sobs his heart out.

At length he is sufficiently composed to reflect: I never cried when Tania left. Everything wise within me insisted that I should cry, but I turned my back. He realizes that he hasn't wept freely since he was a child. Dear Jesus, does it take this abomination to lance my constricted soul?

And his spirits do indeed soar. Without denying the reality of what he has done, his pettiness and spite and ignominy, he encompasses a mood of redemptive benediction. It brings a wide, silly grin to his mouth.

'Bunny rabbit,' he declares, lofting the animal high over his head, laughing as its big grubby hind feet thump the air, 'ain't nobody been where we wuz, baby. Let me tell you, buster, I like this side a lot better.'

Eddie feeds the rabbit a strip of lettuce and steps through the tedious details of shutdown. He meditates on his humbling and his bestiality, flinching at memory.

The frailty at his core yearns to interpret it all as a stress nightmare, an hallucination. Denial would be not merely futile and cowardly, it would betray what has been offered him. She had thought him rather piquant, eh? Holy shit. It is a point of access. Eddie Rostow confesses to his worst self that he needs all the help he can get.

The next cycle brings swifter recovery. Rostow splashes tepid water from the flask into his face, dabbing at his reddened eyelids. Soon he must spend some time figuring how to replicate the loop condition after he gets

off this one. Fertile conjectures multiply; he suppresses them for the moment. Nerving himself, he walks edgily to the Software Centre, nodding companionably to the passing student. The directors have ascended to their solace. His knock is tentative.

Jennifer's smile startles him with its warmth. She lowers her hairbrush. 'Well, hello, sailor.'

Eddie stands in the doorway, drinking her unbruised face. Despite himself he flushes.

'Don't just loiter there with intent, man. You're the unsung hero of the moment. It was sensational.' She frowns. 'I hated it with the rabbit, though.'

'Jennifer,' he says in a rush, 'I'm sorry about the party. You know.'

'That. Yeah. You were rather blunt.'

'You inspire the village idiot in me.'

'Sailor, that's the sweetest thing anyone ever. Coming up to poach on the Professional Entertainment Allowance Fund?'

Eddie melts disgustingly within, wallowing in amnesty. 'I happen to know a place.'

'You've got a fifth of Jack Daniels squirrelled in your locker.'

'I've always admired your mind. Passionately.'

'That wasn't the part you molested in public.'

'I am,' he tells her, 'truly sorry.' Her hair flows in his fingers and he puts his hand against hers for a moment. Jenny touches his hand.

'While we dally,' she tells him, 'Stan is up there screwing you.'

'No argument. He's like that. All scientists are lunatics and swindlers. I intend to fight. More to the point, are you screwing Dr Singh?' Oh Christ, don't answer that.

'I will not. It's none of your business. For God's sake, don't get snotty. Here, let me help you off with your—'

'Shouldn't we shut the door?'

'Kick it, you're closer. Why did it take you so long to get here?'

'Don't ask.'

'Hmm. You know, I thought you were going to throw a tantrum in the lab.'

Eddie tries to keep his tone light. 'Upon my soul, Miss Barton, that'd be no way for a besotted genius to contest his rights.' Shortly he asks: 'Won't the printouts get runkled?'

'There's more in the computer, you fool.'

On the next loop, abandoning his dazed inertia for an instant, Eddie glances at Jennifer's wrist watch and ensures that the flash comes as the flash comes as the flash comes.

TRICKSTER

by Rosaleen Love

The ancient dried out Lake Mungo in western New South Wales and Mungo Woman who was found there are now part of the international archaeological dictionary. Her cremation established human occupation in Australia at at least 40,000 years, at a time when the Neanderthal Man was still in Europe. Not only that, but the Aboriginals at Lake Mungo were modern people, and they left behind evidence of a belief in an after-life, a kind of Dreaming.

Kirsten Garratt, *From Mungo to Makaratta*

'What's it all for?' Alicia asked, the day she started work. The row of fossil skulls marched along the edge of the table, ranged in order from the most gracile at one end, to the most rugged at the other

'It's called human research,' she was told. 'It's the science of human nature.'

Alicia had her doubts right from the start, but she kept them to herself.

She was shown around the skull room. The table with the row of skulls stood in the centre. The rest of the bones were sorted into white boxes, each neatly labelled with names ribs, humerus, ulna. They stood in stacks along the walls. Filing cabinets were filled with casts and reconstructions of missing pieces of bone. So much hard

work, so much material, collected, collated and reconstructed from a belief in the value of human research.

'You'll soon get used to it here,' she was told. 'It's a job, like any other.'

'That's what I thought,' said Alicia, glowing with life and love in the house of bones.

Alicia is formally introduced. 'This is the skull from Cow Swamp ' The skull from Cow Swamp sits in a pool of light, fixed upright to a frame.

Alicia inclines her head.

'And this is the skull from Keilor.' Alicia is suitably grave. One must respect the dead.

'This is the skull from Green's Bush.' The introductions continue. Alicia wonders how she will remember it all.

'It's easy, once you know how,' says Rosie. She's worked there for years. Rosie Byrne knows her way round the skull room.

'Everything is,' murmurs Alicia.

Alicia learns the ways of the skull room. There are frequent arguments, for a start.

'What's it all for?' Alicia asks her new colleagues, those who could speak.

'It's so we know where we're going, that we have to find out where we've been.' Plowright liked his origins clear, and his future predictable.

'We all want to know where we're going. We just disagree about where we've come from,' Rosie explains to Alicia.

Alicia listens and learns.

'It's who we've come from,' says Anthony Torok.

Torok finds the bones a problem.

For Rosie Byrne, it was easy. The first man was a woman.

Torok disagrees. 'What makes you so sure?' he asks.

'What makes you so sure it's not?' she replies.

Her colleagues think she's perverse.

Torok doubts whether the beginnings of culture can be

traced to any one individual with an exceptionally prominent brow. 'You can't say, here civilisation begins, here in Cow Swamp, just because we've got a few bits and pieces of bone to play around with.'

'It's obvious, once you think of it,' says Rosie to Alicia. The women work together in the skull room, calipers in hand and computers at the ready. 'What's wrong is the idea. What's wrong is the ape man.'

'It's obvious, once you think of it,' says Anthony Torok. 'What's wrong are the bones. The bones didn't change the world. The world changed the bones, just once, at one time, at one place.'

'That place is Europe,' says James Plowright.

'That place is Africa,' says Anthony Torok.

'That place is Melbourne,' says Rosie Byrne. 'Cow Swamp, to be precise. There, *homo* became *sapiens*, saw the light, and then took off for Europe.'

At night in the skull room the bones rearrange themselves, a little, not much. The indentations in the skull from Cow Swamp deepen. The orbital ridges thicken. Scratches in the teeth enamel sink in, just a fraction.

Soon there will be a new theory of the origins of the human race.

The workers in the skull room assume the bones remain the same and it is their theories which change. But that is not the case.

The bones know. It amuses them.

'There's always a margin of error,' say the scientists. But they mean a margin of error for them. They do not consider that it might be the skull which is playing fast and loose with their measurements.

Scientific truth is only relative, and the fact that scientific truth is only relative is the only thing that really is true. Truly? Yes, truth is never the whole truth, and that is the name of the game.

It doesn't matter, provided the skull plays fair. But the skull from Cow Swamp never learned the rules.

Rosie Byrne is increasingly delighted with the skull's activities. She sees teeth which are worn in a particular manner.

'Look,' she says to her colleagues. 'It's the way the teeth are worn.'

'Yeah,' they say. They have their own work to do.

'I mean, it's the way the teeth aren't worn.' Rosie was all for the search after truth.

The skull sits in its frame, unblinking.

'The skull from Cow Swamp, it's a woman.'

Her colleagues have heard it all before.

The first man was a woman? The skull was buggered if it knew.

The workers in the skull room believe the bones are legitimate enough. It is the claims made for them that are preposterous.

For the skull all claims for legitimacy are relative. That's okay. It knows it's fiddling the evidence.

For the workers, there is the search after truth.

For the skull, there is the element of trickery. A forgery may, after all, be a form of art and the end of art is to provide us with something from which we can learn a great deal.

The skull could promise them that.

Alicia dreams of life and love.

Rosie dreams of fame. She's sometimes worried though. What if she's right, but she gives the wrong reason?

Nobody's perfect.

The Fall of Man: that's a metaphor for the burden of animal instincts that survives as a leftover from the past. So that we may know instinctively that we are right, though reason cannot tell us why. In this corruption may lie our intuitive strength, or just corruption pure and simple. Inside the man of reason, there may lurk the fraud.

Inside each skull there lurks the trickster.

But that's the tricky part. How can a skull be said to deceive?

'Such teeth,' said Rosie Byrne when she next saw them. 'Nice and unworn, a woman's teeth. It's a cultural thing,' she explained to her colleagues. 'The men chew kangaroo tendons and their teeth get worn in a quite distinctive way.'

Such teeth, all the better to eat you with, said Pleistocene man to Pleistocene marsupial. The skull knew more than it could tell.

Plowright kept his thoughts steady. He wasn't going to rewrite the entire prehistory of Australia because of a few new ideas. He was, after all, the boss. He had to keep the funds rolling in.

Rosie broods. Men of reason and men of business speak much the same language. Both, after all, want profit, though one speaks of profit in the search for gold, the other of gain in the search after truth. There can be no loss in the search for knowledge, that's one advantage. For even the wrong question, correctly answered, can tell us something, even if it tells us we were wrong in the first place. That is all told, a gain, for the worker has gained some credit. Though of course she gains more if she asks the right question and receives the right reply.

In the skull room there is the goal of knowledge, and the goal of glory. In the search after truth, there may be some glory, but little truth; there may be some credit, though a loss is recorded.

Some say that the goal 'to know' serves only the function of rhetoric, that what matters is only the cycle of rewards and advances. But that is a cynical viewpoint.

The skull changes, doing it slowly, and new measurements do not agree with the old.

'It's an unacceptable margin of error,' Rosie is told.

She is puzzled, but cheerfully accepts criticism in the spirit in which it is intended. Or she says she does, while gritting her teeth and snarling at Alicia.

Oh, the tyranny of the skull.

Anthony Torok smiles and does not overtly sneer.

Alicia is reading the papers, searching for another job.

In every court, there is a jester. In every circus, there is a clown. In every tribe, there is a trickster.

It buggers up the search after truth no end.

Rosie never gets to publish her discovery.

There is a court case, and the bones must be returned to the place they came from.

The bones are gathered up for cremation. They are taken to a river bank.

We must respect the dead. We must burn the bones.

They are burned according to old rites.

The workers in the skull room are liberated from the tyranny of the bones. Only they do not know it.

Rosie Byrne doesn't see it that way. She weeps for the end of knowledge. Then she dries her tears.

'It was a good job, while it lasted,' says Alicia.

James Plowright finds a congenial job in the public service, and Anthony Torok joins a university.

The bones are going. The bones are gone.

Nothing remains.

At the cremation site, dust and ashes move, in a purposeful fashion. They form new shapes. Soon there will be new games played on newcomers to the search after truth.

There will be campfire sites, and middens.

There will be radio-carbon dating and spectroscopic analysis.

What does it matter, in the end? The activity called problem solving is all. The results matter less. Every problem which is solved will raise others in its turn, and so the search after truth will go on, indefinitely, into the future.

THE JURONKA VALIDATION

by Van Ikin

I was working out on Gamill at the time, using long work shifts to smother thoughts and guilt about Toni but news and gossip travels fast in the Dead Sector and even on godforsaken Gamill we'd heard about the discovery of the so-called Juronka Chamber

Any new find sends out a flash wave of rumour, and this time, like every time, there were whispers that they'd finally found something that was actually important The ultimate discovery, they were saying.

Alien bodies, at long last?

Why not? It had to happen some time.

Of course, I'd heard that too many times before and I knew not to let myself become enthused. But I'd been itching to get back to my proper work as a Validator, and the excitement and speculation about Juronka made the work on Gamill seem dull and pointless.

Toni was gone That was fact, and I had to accept it No more moping. Perhaps I was partly to blame, all right, that was accepted too. No one is perfect, no relationship is smooth. Toni was gone and it was my fault, sure. But it was her fault too; we shared blame equally. Whatever view you took, it made no sense for me to sacrifice a promising career just because of a personal trauma, and the Juronka find was a brilliant opportunity to step straight back into professional work.

Besides, Toni was the one who had opted out, not me. *She* was the one who split us

"You've never worked on Juronka before?"

I hadn't expected that they would question my experience, but the Supervisor made it clear she was lukewarm about my application.

"I think it's a premature return to Validation duties. Premature from your own point of view, I'd have thought—but definitely premature in relation to squad morale. How do you think others would regard your re-appointment?"

She paused to let that barb sink in, to see how I'd take it. But I toughed it out with silence, wondering if she'd slide out the old cliche, *Toni was well regarded, you know.*

"A lot of people blame you for Toni's death, you realize."

Not just the squads, *a lot of people.* Meaning she was one of them.

"I can live with that."

"If you say so." She stared me out for several seconds, pitting her reluctance against my resolve.

"Your record shows that you've never worked on Juronka before."

How could that be relevant?

She sighed. "If you haven't worked on Juronka then you won't be known there, so there's no problem with morale. And it might help the situation here on Gamill if we moved you elsewhere. . ."

She paused, as if considering. Making me wait.

"All right then; I'm prepared to put forward your application. But it will have to be cleared by Sector Command."

That could have been done by voice-message, but to snub me she keyed her message as text. I waited. Surprisingly, there was a delay before the reply came through, and I saw her face betray a frown of concern as she decoded the text on her screen.

"It can only be an interim appointment. You'll be restored to full rank as Validator, and you'll handle the Juronka find until your current work-tour ends. But I insist that you take your Rest Relief once it's due; is that acceptable?"

It was, for I understood the ploy. She *had* to give me the appointment. I was well qualified, and it would be a big boost to her Personal Efficiency Profile to have had a Validator appointed from her squads. But she couldn't let me feel I'd won a victory, for it wouldn't be good for morale to have me grinning. Or to have people saying she had abandoned Toni just to boost her PEP. She had to make me feel I was a supplicant.

Well, I could play along with that, no trouble. Rest-Relief stand-down wasn't due for ten weeks, and if the Validation wasn't completed long before that time, it could only mean that it was a find of incredible significance. They wouldn't be likely to force the stand down of the Validator on a major find.

"It's fully acceptable. You'll handle all notifications." And I'll need a new Validator's blazon for my uniform, of course."

They wasted a day transmitting data around the Sector and recalibrating my pay, but finally I was on a shuttle, soaring free of Gamill and the worksquads.

Free of Toni, too.

I did think of her with tenderness at that moment. We'd had times of marvellous happiness together, and it was sad to think of my lovely lively Toni as a clod of ash interred on Gamill's memorial hill.

Even the arguments between us hadn't seemed that bad. Not at first, especially. Her work was coming along very well, and she had good career prospects in the Dead Sector. Her Personal Efficiency Profile was high — higher than my own, actually, until the trouble set in.

Yet she'd let it all go, tossed it away. Said it was all wastage and didn't mean a thing.

I still couldn't understand it and I suppose I never will.

Why, Toni, why?

Juronka lay two planets sunward from Gamill, and so far it represented the furthest sunward reach of exploration in the Sector. As my shuttle left the atmosphere of Gamill, I was surprised to see that the number of orbiting probes and watch-stations had increased tenfold since I'd been landed. Even more surprisingly, the void between planets was now enlivened with exploratory activity. The shuttle must have passed a dozen Debris Units, all scouring the emptiness for traces of significant space-junk, and I had a long close look at Sector Command—the immense new co-ordinating centre that had become operational just months before my posting to Gamill.

There was a future here. . . .

A man was sitting opposite in the shuttle, and he too ogled the intricate new structure.

"Impressive, isn't it?" I said, to attempt conversation.

"Oh yes." But he was indifferent. "I think the credits could be spent to better purpose, though."

He looked pointedly at my Validator's blazon. "You're headed for Juronka, then?"

Stupid question: it could only be Caporth or Juronka—and Caporth hadn't seen activity for years. Not anything to do with Validation, anyway.

"Juronka, yes."

"Obviously you're not keen to return to Earth!"

That stunned me. *How could he know? What rumours had he heard?* But I played it cautious and asked what he meant.

"You haven't heard? They announced a new bonus for the worksquads. Shortened the current work-tour by two months, and everyone on stand-down gets Rest-Relief on Earth. Buying votes again "

It had nothing to do with Toni; I was glad I'd been cautious.

Then the deeper meaning struck home.

"Wait a minute . . . Shortened by *two months*? You mean the squads are getting a stand-down in—what, two weeks?"

"True. It's vote buying, as I said. Announced from Sector Command, just hours ago."

Of course; the Supervisor had frowned when she saw the news on her screen. She had probably keyed in a recommendation *against* my re-appointment, but Sector Command had over-ruled her, knowing it would only be a short-term posting.

"Looks like I *will* be returning to Earth. . ."

The man was startled "I hardly think so! The Validator would have to stay on. I was on assignment at Sector Command when this Juronka thing arose, and it was common knowledge they've made a major discovery" He gave me a slow wink "Don't suppose you'd give me a hint? Rumours say they've found an alien in suspended animation. . ."

I'd expected to land on Juronka as something of a hero, for hopes are always high when a major Validation begins But I had not expected the euphoric tumult at the spaceport.

Holo-crews were gathered in waiting, some of them from as far out as Drangur and Leszurn That was the first surprise, but it was fairly minor; after all, if they'd heard about this find on Gamill, why shouldn't news have spread further out as well?

Several of the crews were asking for interview, pressing me to confirm that alien bodies had finally been found. I declined curtly, pointing out that I could neither confirm nor deny until I had investigated. And that brought surprise number two: the officials in my welcoming-entourage suggested that it might "facilitate" if I did speak freely about what I knew.

That was easily done.

"I repeat that I know *nothing* and that I have *no* statement. I am here to *Validate*, not to speculate."

That split my entourage, its officials hastening to the holo-crews in attempts at mollification (prompting me to wonder if it could have been official invitation that brought in so many holos in the first place). I even thought I saw one member of the party speak to my fellow passenger from the shuttle.

Only two of the entourage stayed with me. They led me to a skimmer and took me to my new quarters. Their manner was cordial, but reserved . . . and uneasy. It was clear that things were not going as they had planned.

After that I was abandoned. A day's "settling in time" they called it, but it was more an opportunity for them to regroup. After a few dull hours of watching holos, I left my room to roam. A skimmer whisked me to the city-core, and I dawdled on the outer belts of the walkways, letting the conveyors move me slowly so I could watch and listen and immerse myself in the atmosphere.

Juronka City was in a festive mood, its walkways spectacular with the bright yellow uniforms of Forces personnel. Hordes of them, obviously a conjunction of Rest-Relief for several units. Blare-screens pulsed out their liminals, promoting products and places, welcoming tourists, imaging the smiling faces of planetary politicians. (Perhaps my fellow passenger had been right about vote buying.) Several screens proclaimed President Oleno's famous words. "We seek to end the great human loneliness of cosmic isolation."

I paused for food or drink several times, happy to be savouring life on a bustling world. Happily keeping Toni out of mind.

At one sipper-stall I chatted to a girl for half an hour. Persuaded her twice to let me buy us drinks. I could have pushed the relationship further, perhaps, but the alcohol steered her from melancholy to anger, and the words of her bitterness reminded me too much of Toni.

"It's all just stupid! We discover a solar system that's been wiped out—but do we keep clear? Oh no. We go in to investigate, we *explore*! And we don't even know if we're

tangling with plague or warfare or just death by natural-causes or whatever . . . It's *stupid*!"

Validation always begins with briefing. That's appropriate, for the Validator is always brought in from outside. The facts are laid out, stripped of theory or interpretation, those who made the find are made available for further questioning, and the Validator prepares a report, including recommendations about funding and resourcing for further operations.

It didn't happen that way on Juronka.

They'd made up their minds already about what they'd found, and they had even planned what my recommendations should be. The more I interviewed and questioned, the more I heard the same story: they'd found a vast underground chamber full of alien bodies—bodies that were possibly still alive, in suspended animation—and it was imperative that I act quickly to announce a major fund and recommend that Sector Command place the site in the hands of Forces personnel.

It made me wonder about what I'd seen in Juronka City. All the Forces uniforms, that happy conjunction of several Forces units on stand-down in the same place at the same time . . . All just waiting for me to call them in.

The lower-ranked squad workers were more open, no-one had briefed them too closely on the consensus interpretation and the approved set of recommendations. From them I learnt the most important truth of all: no one had actually seen or touched an alien body, dead or alive.

"They just saw all these aliens in their big chamber, then the politicians came down to the site, and then they sealed it off. My squad was sent off to another posting, and now we've got R-R in two weeks . . ."

"Big discovery . . . lots of speeches, lots of blare . . . and then they clear the area and say it's got to wait for Validation. . . ."

And yet, from the officials in my entourage, the same insistent line. "We have found aliens at last, possibly even

still living, and it is imperative that you as Validator should call in the use of Forces personnel."

My reply to this took them by surprise: "First tell me who you are," I said. Keeping calm, keeping cordial.

I'd gone through introduction formalities with each one at first meeting, but collectively they had no idea who was familiar to me and who was not. So they all obligingly poured out their names and ranks and degrees and specializations. Then *I* told *them* who they were.

"You're supplicants! That's all. You've made a discovery and you think it's important. You really believe that, and you've done a lot of gruelling data assembly—sure! But you're supplicants because it's *my* word that counts. I'm the *Validator!* Okay?"

It wasn't, that was clear. Something unusual was going on, and the core of it seemed to be their belief that they could erode my power and independence. Yet they knew this wasn't standard procedure, and that's where I had some power. They didn't know the dividing line, didn't know at exactly what point they could call my bluff. So I called theirs.

It was time to inspect the site.

From a distance it looked like a huge low hillock, slightly flattened on top. Flying across the site in the skimmer I could see several squads at work, but it was clear they had been ordered to keep to the perimeters of the find. As the skimmer drew closer I could tell that the mound had been shaped artificially, and when we hovered beside the artifact I could see the outline of an entrance-portal.

"Is it a standard delivery-system portal?" I asked.

Larsen, the Analysis Officer, nodded affirmatively. She was the most natural and open of the Juronka party, and I liked her. When the officials had told me that it would be best if only a small group went on-site—to "minimize publicity, since I was so adverse to it"—I had immediately seized the upper hand by defining "a small group" as myself and one other, with Larsen as the other. Since she

was an Analysis Officer, the choice was unassailable; I had neatly used their own obstructionist rules against them.

"If it's the standard portal system, that means Race-B was established on Juronka, too."

That was significant information: it showed that this *was* potentially a major discovery. Current thinking about the Dead Sector used available evidence to hypothesize the existence of at least three races in the blighted red-sun planetary system. No-one knew, of course, whether the three races had originated on planets within the system or whether one or more of them had originally come from outside. We *did* know that Race A had used interplanetary travel, for traces of their presence had been found on most of the planets so far explored. But traces of Race-B had to date been confined to Gamill, and it made little sense for Race-B to have travelled from Gamill to Juronka without leaving evidence of its presence on the intervening planet, Caporth.

"Are there many of these Race-B portals on Juronka?" I asked.

"No. This is the only site. That's what's so—" She cut herself off.

She had been quick to sense my dislike for her colleagues' assertiveness, and she instinctively drew back from playing their game. That's why I liked her.

"Go on, go on! Have your say; everyone else does on Juronka." I flashed her a smile, trying to signal informality. "I'm only resentful of interpretations when they're presented as the line I'm meant to take in my report. You were going to say what's so special about the site, weren't you?"

"Yes."

But I could tell from her hesitation that she would say no more.

"Well, let's get the exploration started." I stepped onto the doormat-like grid in front of the portal and felt my body jerk gently as the delivery-system activated and whisked me into the interior of the mound. Larsen

followed, both of us blinking as our eyes adapted to dim interior lighting.

"Must be a solar powered energy storage system," I muttered. "Typical of Race-B technology, judging from what they've found on Gamill."

It was good to be back in action again, and maybe it could be for longer than just a week or two. If this really was a major find and I could establish its credentials firmly and quickly . . . Well, it would make no sense to replace me, would it?

I wandered very slowly into the alien installation, scan-recording detail on my compact. The entrance-corridor ran for about a metre, suggesting that the outer walls of the mound were of that thickness. (But hollow or filled, and in either case, why?) The entrance-corridor then formed a T intersection with a much wider corridor that seemed to extend several hundred metres to left and right. In the opposite wall of that long corridor, at precisely regular intervals, were sets of precisely identical entrance-portals like the one we had just come through.

I wondered for a moment if we were entering some alien prison system, or spacecraft launch-bays—but I made myself dismiss such speculations. It was not a Validator's job to concoct vague theories.

"This array of portals," I said to Larsen, "has it been penetrated by the site workers?"

She nodded, and gave me her cheery smile. "We've been through four doors, chosen at random." Then hesitated: "I don't know exactly which ones, but the Overseer would have it on record." More hesitation, then: "I myself was asked to penetrate the door on the extreme right."

Asked to . . .? What did that mean? Procedure had gone out the chute on Juronka.

"The door on the extreme right. Okay. What did you find?"

"They found the same thing every time." Sensing my impatience with hesitation, she hurried on. "Each door leads into a short section of corridor—probably only three

metres long, but packed with instrumentation of some kind. Very complex—or that's what we thought. And at the end of the short corridor there's another door. It works on the delivery system, just like the others, but this one doesn't work automatically."

"It doesn't? What do you mean?"

"With the normal delivery-system door you stand on the entrance-grid and that activates the mechanism—right? The portal flashes open and you glide through—like on a conveyor. But with these doors you stand on the grid and nothing happens. You don't go anywhere . . "

"An inhibitor system," I explained, and again it sounded impressively authoritative. "We've seen plenty of those out on Gamill. There'll be a dual inhibitor beam system on the portal, and you've got to deliberately break its circuit before the portal will activate. It's a low security safety device, that's all, you just have to reach up with both hands and break the beams near source. Now come on, let's try one of these portals and test it for ourselves."

We strode down the corridor to the extreme right portal which had already been penetrated. (No sense taking a risk on a different portal. Stay with the known and play it safe.) I stepped onto the activation grid letting it whisk me into the short connecting corridor.

It *was* as if I had entered a spacecraft, the instrumentation ran wall to ceiling, crammed and intricate and complex. A thousand tiny lights winked in different shades and colours, and auditory read-outs hummed a jangle of tunes at me. My compact couldn't handle the input and filled its screen with delay and overload icons.

Larsen entered behind me, and the lights changed colour and the tunes changed pitch. (Signifying a new body in the space? Or signifying *familiarity* with the new body?)

The short corridor was conceivably a sensor or monitoring device of some kind. But monitoring *what*? And why?

I walked cautiously to the end of the corridor,

approaching the inhibited portal. According to my extensive questioning, this would be as far as anyone had gone in penetrating the Juronka Chamber, so I was about to have my first sight of an alien.

There was a viewing-panel in the middle of the portal. It was set at a height slightly lower than human eye-level, which was in line with our assumption that the Race-B aliens were humanoid though slightly shorter than ourselves. I stooped over, peered inside—and saw why they thought the Juronka Chamber would be the ultimate discovery in the Dead Sector.

The Chamber was filled with creatures of some kind . . . creatures that could indeed have been in suspended animation, sealed into murkily translucent vertical perspex capsules. Row after row after row of them, rack upon rack upon rack, stretched out to the limits of the vast, dimly-lit interior.

I drew back from the view-panel, nearly trembling. Larsen was watching me closely, nervous with eager excitement.

"*Millions of them!*" she whispered. "Just waiting. The aliens themselves—in hibernation. . . ."

Waiting for us to wake them. To wake them and finally unlock the riddle of the Dead Sector.

Larsen was radiant with the wonder of the discovery. For her, my reaction *was* the Validation. This was the culmination of humanity's efforts in the Dead Sector. Now we might begin to discover what had happened in this region of space.

To give myself credit, I did think of Toni. Knowing she had missed this great moment, sadly realizing that it proved all her despair was wrong. *Poor Toni, you could so easily have been here.*

Thinking of posterity, I spoke for my compact: "When we enter this Chamber, the long human loneliness may be at an end."

Larsen must have thought I was speaking to her. She strode to the view-panel portal and extended both hands

to mask the inhibitor beams. Too slowly, I sensed the corridor's instrumentation shout a warning, the winking lights ominously changing colour as the auditory jangle shifted pitch. Larsen was already striding through the portal . . . but it was moving her forward at a much slower pace than the standard delivery-system portal . . . and I was about to shout to her to watch out, to turn back. . . .

But she was already through, striding forward into history, straight into the Chamber, seeking to end the cosmic human loneliness forever.

Her entire body erupted in a blaze of light.

And she came crashing backward out of the portal.

Burning.

I gave priority to getting Larsen into care, crouching beside the smouldering flesh and trying to keep her still until help arrived. Finally, mercifully, she passed out, but I could still smell the burning . . .

The Site Overseer was fearsome in his anger, and we'd have come to blows if not for the intervention of the Medicals. I insisted that he station all his worksquads around the site, and two of the Medicals urged him to obey. At least it got us separated.

Woonpei, the chief Analytical Encoder, tried to rescue order from the chaos. "You could have a sedi-shot if you need it. Some of them are mild and would only put you out for an hour or two. But first of all you'd want to know that Larsen's already on a skimmer and will be given the best possible care. And secondly, before you might choose to take a shot, it would be best if you could pass on to me any further instructions for the Overseer."

"Instructions?" *What instructions? It was all a mess.* "I've already told him to get his worksquads to form a cordon. It's not likely there'd be any further danger, but since we don't understand what kind of system we may have triggered, it's certainly wise to keep clear. . . ."

Impatience stripped the gloss off Woonpei's soothing patter.

"*Of course* the squads form a cordon! That's not the issue What's to be done to keep the aliens *in?* You have to request the use of Forces personnel!"

"Keep the . . ." You don't mean they're re-animating?"

"We don't know what's going on; *you're* doing the Validation, not us. You were only meant to write a report and then call in the Forces—but now your stupid blundering has roused the aliens!"

Giving me no chance to thunk or reply, he nodded curtly at one of the Medicals and I was put out with a shot.

It kept me down for much longer than an hour or two.

When my head finally cleared and vision steadied, I realized I was back in my quarters. Time had passed—been *allowed* to pass—and a new Validator was probably on the way already.

A Validator in Forces uniform.

Procedure had been breached on this find, probably for reasons connected with its magnitude Politicians had tried to capitalize on its potential, and the team entrusted with its handling had been more interested in publicity and funding. Sector Command was involved as well: they had advanced Rest Relief to get the Sector cleared

Those who knew about the find—those who knew how very *little* we actually knew about it—they were all being cleared out, dispersed. Rumour was what remained; rumour fuelled by widespread talk and speculation, rumour that would have spread all the faster if I had obligingly granted interviews to the holo-crews.

No-one here was interested in the truth; the Juronka Chamber was just publicity potential

The end of humanity's loneliness? What a joke!

The real loneliness was about to begin. For me, anyway. Because I was starting to understand that Toni might have been right.

During our last weeks, when it was all collapsing, Toni ranted on and on. *Meaning. Focus Purpose in life.* Suddenly she was obsessed with abstracts, and willing to

shrug off realities for their sake. Appointments were abandoned if she wanted to talk and rage and cry, and she cancelled out of study-modules that would have accelerated her next promotion. There were times she did not report for work. Her PEP flopped.

She hated the Sector. The *Dead-dead-dead* Dead Sector, she would say "Where we spend all our time trying to understand *dead aliens*, but no-one wants to know anything about being a human."

And so on. It was just shift strain, but it was a very bad case. Toni longed for Earth and family and human warmth and—change.

That's why I said I would book the passage to Earth. Travel was strictly controlled, but I thought I could use a Validator's rank to waive a few of the rules. If not—well, we could always apply for passage on compassionate grounds, but that would have long-term impact on her career prospects. She just wanted to know that she *could* go back, and I really thought I could achieve it. The linkage with Earth was what she needed, the knowledge that a return could be within her grasp. *Reassurance.*

Our nearness was so tender, so *caring*, when I made the promise to book passage. It was one of our most precious moments: a return to our old happiness. Beautiful, really. She was brimming with joy, joy in tears and laughter, and she said it was the only, *only* time another human being had reached to her soul in understanding.

That was catharsis, I suppose, or apotheosis, or something. But I'm not afraid to admit that I was drawn in too, drawn in by the beauty of another person's sheer joy. I found myself sharing and promising and *understanding*.

It was beautiful, for we were *one*. United. Caring.

Understanding. . . .

Joke!

I made myself stop thinking about it. Shoved her aside, brutally, as dead.

I had worries enough.

What could I do?

As I hoped, the worksquad personnel were utterly nonplussed when I appeared on the site and asserted authority as Validator. They had no reason to know how I had been undermined. "Has there been any actual *evidence* of aliens coming to life? Sounds from inside the Chamber? Any lights or movements in the corridors?"

"There's been no reports—but then, none of us has been inside. We were just told to guard the site but keep a safe distance."

I began to relax.

"Listen carefully. These are easy orders. I want eight squaddies and two skimmers at my disposal—as of *now* and you'll have to organize to get me anything else I might need. Understood?"

He didn't like it, but he had to lump it. As far as he knew, I was the Validator.

Now I had to see if I could find out what had happened to Larsen.

When I looked at her lying in the medi-cradle, my nostrils still streamed with the reek of her burning. Yet according to the Medicals her life had never been in serious danger; it was only the outermost surface of her skin that had been scorched.

"The eerie thing about it," the Medical said, "was that the flesh was scorched *evenly*—even beneath different layers of clothing and through her boots. Incredible precision!"

I pondered over that while I tried to make sense of Larsen's mumbled, strained version of what had happened. She felt—as I did—that she had fully passed through the portal before the catastrophe occurred. (That was a vitally important point, for it implied that the portal itself was not the triggering mechanism.) But she felt that she had done nothing thereafter to invite the fiery holocaust; she had just stepped forward into the Chamber, without delay, and definitely without touching anything. . . .

The information did not amount to much, but it did give me a few ideas.

It hurt to leave, for I couldn't give her a touch or kiss and I couldn't expect to see her smile. It was too, too much like the last moment with Tonu at the spaceport, watching her walk away and thinking it was sad but all right.

The site workers were edgy as we approached the Chamber's outer portal. Expecting to be ambushed by re-animated aliens, I suppose. But we passed through successfully -with myself in the lead, of course- and even in the long T-intersection corridor there were no nasty lurking surprises. So we hauled my special gadgetry into the mound.

It was a childishly simple device, but simplicity was part of its virtue. I had commandeered a standard self-propelled repair drone, and I had ordered that a long steel rod be welded out from its chest. The machine looked like an ungainly mechanical jousting device, waving its long lance in front of it--but it would do the job.

After great uncertainty, I had decided that we would go back to the extreme-right portal that had seared Larsen. It might waste further time by doing this, for it had occurred to me that the portal might have sealed itself off to further penetration, but I was nervous about trying a different portal in case its weapon and triggering system were different.

Having stationed three men on watch at the outer portal leading into the mound, I left another three on duty at the extreme-right portal in the T-Bar. If things went wrong, those men at least would live to tell the tale.

Trundling our jousting drone before us, I entered the gadget-clustered inner corridor. I could see the men nervously watching the winking lights, backing away whenever the auditory signal changed pitch.

"I'm pretty sure this is just monitoring equipment," I assured them. "Nothing to worry about."

Not yet. Nothing had happened to Larsen while she was in this corridor. And if I didn't proceed with this plan, the new Validator would probably replace me in hours. I

looked with dread at the inhibited portal and its dark view-panel.

"Let's get to work."

From the drone's storage bin we unloaded equipment: five recording cameras with universal clamps, a small energy-pack with a timer device, a cluster of portable sensor-scan modules, a series of tools.

The scanning modules had to be attached first; they magni clamped to the metalloid skin of the drone. Then the cameras were positioned: two pointing forward toward the fatal portal, two fixed to the top of the jousting drone, one facing backward and the other focused upon the length of the lance; and the fifth peering down the corridor at me, recording every step of my preparations. I checked and re-checked their image-relay functions, testing the reception on my compact.

The next task was to rig the two rods that would break the inhibitor beam on the view-panel portal. At least that was easy and fast, and it took only a few seconds to connect it to the energy pack that would act as its trigger. After that I sneaked a quick glance through the view-panel, just to satisfy myself that the aliens were still quiet. They were.

Work on.

Last stages now. Having manoeuvred the drone into the middle of the corridor, lance pointing at the waiting portal, we connected the energy pack to its remote-control unit. I dialled the timer to trigger in ten minutes, then the three of us moved swiftly back out the portal and into the T-bar corridor. Still seven minutes until the timer would trigger.

I ordered the squaddies to get themselves out of the mound—an order they were very willing to obey. Their duty now was to stand guard and wait.

If I wasn't out of the mound within an hour, the squads had orders to sound an alarm. But I was fairly sure no one would be able to help me if things did go wrong. . .

The men's footsteps faded out of the mound, leaving me completely alone.

An alarm zinged on my compact and I knew the timer had just triggered the energy-pack. The drone would now propel itself onto the activation-grid in front of the portal, and then—as my inhibitor breaker pulsed into action—it would be moved through the portal and into the Chamber, triggering the device that had burned Larsen.

I switched on the vision-relay in my compact and peered into its hi-resolution screen. I was pleased to realize that my hands were not shaking.

The drone rolled forward. The inhibitor-breaker cut in and the portal opened. The drone slowly rolled through and was scorched in searing light. The view-screen went blank.

(Again I could almost smell the burning.)

I watched it all repeated on the stored relay from Camera Two, then I activated the next relay to see what the drone's forward-facing camera had recorded.

The makesluft lance lurched forward, gaining speed as it was carried through the portal, then a fire of light erupted across the lance, burning until the screen blanked.

I played the scene over, again and again, peering at every detail. Weighing my impressions.

One thing was definite: the fire started at the *top* of the lance and worked back. Which meant the device was being triggered at a certain point in the Chamber entry area. But how? *Why?*

Another discovery: the activation-grid on the Chamber side of the portal was unlike any other I'd seen. Other grids were small and fairly unobtrusive; this one was nearly double the normal size, and it was bathed in a soft yellow glow with a thin strip of blue light marking its edge.

The vision continued in slow-motion and I saw that the fire spread along the lance *as it passed through the band of blue light*. That was obviously the triggering device.

I still didn't know why the aliens felt they needed such a device—but I was beginning to form a suspicion about it, and I knew the next step was to view the relay from the drone's rearward-pointing camera.

First I reviewed the known facts. Larsen and the drone had both been scorched, and it seemed possible that both had met their fate for the very same reason: they both had crossed through the beam of blue light. And there was something else that they had in common too: *forward motion.* Larsen had gone striding into the Chamber, strutting her name into history, as she thought, and the drone had been self-propelled.

Or, putting it more pertinently: neither had been programmed for stopping.

So I ran the rearward-scene in slow-motion, and I saw that my suspicion was correct. The drone moved through the portal, which slipped shut behind it, and I could see from reflections on the portal that the drone became engulfed in burning light. But just before my view-screen went blank, I saw that the illumination in the Chamber-grid changed from yellow to steady green, and at that moment the floor-grid began to activate into forward motion.

What to do now?

Common sense told me to wait, play it slow. The proper procedure would be to prepare another drone and run another trial, this time programming the drone to stop the moment it passed through the portal. *But did I have the time for that?* They probably knew by now that I'd gone missing, and once they'd verified that I hadn't left Juronka, this would be the next place to search.

It's hard to explain, but I had Toni in mind as I made my decision. It was a way of keeping faith with her, I suppose. I don't mean that I was out to *prove* she'd been wrong—I loved her! but I felt I had to pursue this Validation to a conclusion. It was important for everyone, Toni included, that the truth should come out.

So I carefully laid aside my compact and belt-utilities, then strode forward onto the activation-grid in front of the view-panel portal, waited until my body was motionless, then gingerly raised both hands to block the inhibitor beam.

The grid moved me slowly forward until the portal slipped shut behind me, then I froze into absolute immobility—and suddenly wondered, in terror, if my frightened perspiration might trigger the searing light.

Nothing happened, nothing at all. I stood rock-still for close to three minutes, my body bathed in faint yellow light, my eyes trying not to notice the band of lethal blue light just ahead. Abruptly the blue and yellow merged into a peaceful green –and then the grid jerked to life beneath my feet, sliding me forward and depositing me into the Juronka Chamber.

My nerves were fairly shot by then, but I had to keep going. I had theorized correctly about the function of the Chamber-entrance portal, and now it was time to become a hero and make the Validation.

We knew the Race-B aliens had been short but humanoid in form, so it was just a matter of my getting close enough to one of the murky capsules to see if I could verify that it contained a short humanoid creature. If the perspex was too murky for a clear visual identification, then all was lost, for I would have no time to go through the exhaustive testing that would be necessary if I needed to *open* a capsule.

I proceeded very, very cautiously, acutely aware that I was working from theory, not tested fact The only thing I had more or less *proved* was the principle that an object or entity was meant to stay motionless on the grid while the yellow beam was at work Only those who rushed through were scorched and that was a reasonable fail-safe if this system was really guarding the welfare of a million sleeping beings. . . .

Hypothesis cut in after that one near-certainty, but it seemed moderately safe to think that the yellow beam was perhaps some kind of scan. (For what? Weapons? That was why I had left behind my precious compact. But it could have been bacteria or temperature-levels; anything.) There might also be other traps or scans, and perhaps of different kinds.

I was cautiously edging into the chamber when a horrible realization struck me. *The drone was gone.* Not lying around as a charred hulk –just *vanished.* My mind filled with fears of re-animating aliens—but then I saw the tracks of charred rubber in the dim light.

I followed them, carefully, reasoning that the drone's path had been cleared of dangers. The stricken machine had lumbered into the dimness, gradually slewing further and further off course, eventually ramming its charred lance into a capsule and crashing to a halt.

I crept in awe to the edge of the shattered perspex.

I saw what was inside.

It is bitter beyond belief to think Toni might have been right.

The worksquads found me after I'd emerged from the mound. They said I was raging hysterically about the sea.

I can remember nothing of that.

I do remember being given injections, and so I'm certain they used drugs to get my story all the sooner. I think I do remember that.

We knew the Race-B aliens were humanoid creatures – but the things in the capsules were far from humanoid. They were deep-sea creatures, like malformed squids. And they were not in hibernation or suspended animation; they were dead, stone dead, for their bodies had been gutted and the organs stored in caches at the foot of the capsules.

Preserved for purposes unknown.

A research collection, perhaps—or just a sea-food warehouse? A mausoleum for slain enemies, or dead pets? Or the sacred remains from centuries of ritual sacrifice?

Perhaps they were creatures captured and stored for commercial purposes. Organ replacement, possibly. Or just to make perfume or aphrodisiacs?

We might never know.

The aliens must have farmed the seas to herd the creatures in such numbers, and that could mean that the oceans would be as rich a source of Race-B artifacts as the

land itself. We would have to start searching the seas as well. Joke.

I do remember faces. Oh yes! Faces at the spaceport as I was sent away. Happy, beaming, bovine faces, the bliss of the workers converging for passage to Earth. Rest-Relief—and then return. Duty-tours and careers and advancements.

Other faces were beaming too: the doggedly intent faces of political marchers, their noisy rally signifying the advent of a snap election. Blare screens already proclaimed their slogans, and Oleno's gleaming hollow words cast multi-coloured shadows amongst the spaceport crowds.

It was a young pregnant nurse who troubled me most; she sat in a transit coach and sobbed. That girl knew nothing about the Juronka Chamber, cared nothing as I was ushered away in defeat. Private sorrow or trauma caused her tears. *Human affairs.*

That nurse was more alien to me than any capsuled creature. I had no idea what words might reach her, what gesture might soothe.

But in her weeping I saw it all. The uselessness of our endeavour, the hopeless futility of our presence in the Dead Sector. The *Dead-dead-dead* Dead Sector.

And the great human loneliness.

When I saw Toni at the spaceport coming toward me, she was smiling and contented. She'd been so utterly happy since my pledge to book passage: all the problems seemed to have gone. Our times together were happy again, she coped with her work and studies. Mutual understanding surged us forward.

Toward our last day.

Toni at the spaceport, destination Earth. And life.

She was stepping from one conveyor to another, coming closer, riding through the currents of spaceport crowds, coming toward me, happy and fulfilled, at peace with life.

I saw her smile freeze, as if she had momentarily seen or thought of some dreadful thing, so I cheerily waved the transit-coupon in her direction.

She stared at it as if in dismay, and her eyes searched again and again over my uniform, my standard working-gear; they never looked again at my face. She spoke her last-ever words to me.

"Only me, not you? You weren't coming too?"

I didn't even understand. Not quickly enough to respond. Why would I be going to Earth?

Rebuffing me, she stepped to the nearest conveyor. Then to another, another, another—and was gone. Swept into the currents of passenger traffic.

Leaving me affronted, angry. Beginning to understand that I didn't understand.

When I finally decided to leave, I wasn't thinking about where she might have gone, but I suppose I'd have thought that she would have returned to her lodgings. Joke!

By then she was already dead, body still twitching as the energy surges continued to pulse through her, fingers slowly smouldering in the socket. Dead on the scratched synth floor of a privacy-cubicle.

Toni, Toni.

The shuttle rose from Juronka, and as I peered down at the receding planet I couldn't help noticing the immensity of its oceans.

ALL LACED UP

by A. Bertram Chandler

She said, "We must get some iron lace . . ."

I looked up from the Sunday paper, regarded her. She was wearing the rather rapt expression that I have come to associate with inspiration. It becomes her—but it is an expression that I have learned almost to dread.

"Iron lace?" I asked cautiously

"Yes. Iron lace. You know—or don't you? That ancient cast-iron railing stuff that you see around the balconies of old terrace houses . . ."

"Hearts and flowers and whatever," I amplified resignedly "But what for? We haven't got a balcony . . ."

"For interior decoration."

"*Interior decoration?*"

"A space divider."

"*A space divider?*"

"Don't be so dim," she told me "This room—now that we've knocked three rooms, including the kitchen, into one—is rather long . . ."

"Like a railway carriage," I agreed. "Or a railway tunnel . . ."

"Don't be so funny!" she snapped. Then the rapt expression returned to her face. "I can *see* it. From the wall there, to about two thirds of the way across. Iron lace, painted black . . ."

"And picked out in gold . . ."

She looked at me suspiciously, then relaxed. "Yes, you're right. Just a hint of gold. A sort of . . . shadowing . . ."

I began to catch her enthusiasm. "Subtle," I contributed.

"Yes. Subtle. But dramatic." She scooped the Sunday paper off my lap, substituted for it the Saturday one. A slim finger indicated a classified advertisement that she had already ringed with pencil. I read the ad. It had been inserted by the owner of a junkyard, his premises being situated on the outskirts of Parramatta. He had iron lace—sandblasted and ready for installation—for sale. He was open on Sunday.

It wasn't a bad day for a drive—a little on the chilly side, perhaps, but sunny. Swiftly and efficiently Sally piloted the Volkswagen through the city and the suburbs, out on to the Parramatta Road. I was acting as navigator, although at first the job was a sinecure. Instead of studying the road map I was able to keep a keen look-out to port and to starboard, to point out fine examples of the iron lacemaker's art decorating the balconies of some of the old terrace houses that we passed.

And then I had to stop sight-seeing and start navigating. The junkyard was stuck away at the back of beyond, in the middle of a maze of dirt roads that nobody had yet got around to labelling. Sally was worrying about the springs of the car and I, who had given the brute its weekly wash that morning, was concerned about the paintwork and polish as we shuddered over the ruts, ploughed through the dust. But we found the place eventually. It looked like what it was. There was a ragged fence and beyond it were stacks of doors, heaps of old furniture, sad clusters of archaic baths and gas stoves. There was a neat enough fibreboard office from which, as soon as we stopped the car, the proprietor emerged.

He bade us good-day affably and asked what he could do for us. We said that we were just browsing. He left us to

our own devices and, picking our gingerly way through the assorted debris, we browsed

What was on display outside was just the rubbish. It was in a shed that we found the treasure. It was stacked high, panel after panel of the old iron lace, its delicacy of design revealed by the sandblasting, gleaming with the dull yet pleasant sheen of good cast iron.

The proprietor followed us into the shed.

"And would you be interested?" he asked.

I said that we could be interested.

Sally, fingering an intricate filigree of harps and shamrocks, asked, "How much?"

"Two pounds ten a panel, madam," he replied.

"Two pounds ten?" she flared.

"Yes," she was told firmly. "There's the cost of the sandblasting. And one coat of primer . . ."

"Too much," she said.

We turned to go.

He said, "Perhaps you might be interested in this . . ."

"No," said Sally firmly, just as I said, "Perhaps . . ."

The junkman lifted a rag of tarpaulin in a dim corner of the shed. Beneath it was a small stack of panels of metal railing. It gleamed. But it wasn't the gleam of cast iron, better was it that of aluminium. There was something odd about it.

"I can let you have this cheaper," said the proprietor. "A pound a panel."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Iron lace."

"It's not," said Sally.

"It looks . . . interesting," I said.

I went to the corner, lifted one of the panels. It was heavy, but not as heavy as it would have been had it been iron. The metal felt strangely warm to my fingers. I stood it on its edge, propping it against the stack and the wall, stepped back to get the full effect.

The design was intricate enough, but there were no hearts and flowers, no harps and shamrocks. It was

abstract—and yet it was vaguely familiar. I tried to decide what it was that it reminded me of. There were interlocking circles—but they were more than mere circles. There was that odd twist to them . . . I got it then. Mobius Strips.

"It . . . It has something," admitted Sally reluctantly.

"Most people don't like it," confessed the junkman, "but perhaps you . . ."

"I didn't say that I liked it," said Sally firmly. "Not at that price."

"Fifteen shillings?"

"Ten."

"All right. To you—twelve and six."

"What do *you* think, Peter?" she asked me.

"It's . . . It's different," I told her cautiously.

"All right. We'll take six panels."

"Now?" asked the junkman with a rather strange eagerness.

"No. You said in your advertisement that you delivered. My husband will give you the address."

And that was that.

We sat in our chairs and looked at our space divider. It had taken the coating of black matt paint well enough and we had decided that its design was sufficiently dramatic to make the use of gold trimming unnecessary. Dramatic? It was that all right. It was . . . disturbing.

I said, between sips of my drink, "I had a couple of beers with Fred at lunchtime today."

"Oh? What's new with him?"

"He's settling down at the *Courier*. They've got him doing features now."

"What sort of features?"

"Haunts. Poltergeists and such. The *Courier* always has been keen on the supernatural or the paranormal or whatever you care to call it."

"Anything to build up circulation among the credulous."

"They sent him out to investigate and write up a haunted junkyard, Parramatta way . . ."

"A haunted junkyard?" she asked, with awakening interest.

"Was the junkman flogging old tombstones?"

"No. The haunting was in the shed where he kept his iron lace. It appears that every morning he'd find it flung all over the place."

"What junkman was it?" she demanded sharply.

"He didn't say . . ."

"And you didn't ask. Of course."

I was startled by the expression on her face. "What's all the flap about, Sally?"

"But you don't believe . . ."

"I'm an agnostic. I neither believe nor disbelieve."

"Then why . . .?"

"Why was the junkman, *our* junkman, so keen to get rid of *this* iron lace?" she said, pointing.

"But you wanted it."

"I didn't really. It was just the price."

I attempted to reason with her. "I've never heard of haunted iron lace. Besides, this stuff isn't old. The design is . . . contemporary. Modern . . ."

"Too modern," she said.

I began to get what she was driving at. That delicately wrought metal had an alien quality—but it was alien, somehow, in a temporal sense. I got up, refilled our glasses and then, when I was seated again, began to play with ideas, ludicrous ideas, hoping thereby to laugh Sally out of her disturbingly fey mood.

"I see it now," I told her. "I can visualize those panels back where they belong—in the engine-room of a ship, an interstellar ship. They're all part of the Interstellar Drive, the Space Warp. The ship must have crashed near here, and parts of her found their way into the junkyard. And even though there's no power source, there's enough residual energy for the wreckage of the Drive to try to warp Space, to try to sling us from here to Alpha Centauri

in three seconds flat . . ."

She grinned. "You read too much science fiction, Peter," she told me.

"There's no such thing as too much — not if it's good stuff. And, anyhow, Interstellar Drives are far more credible than ghosts and hauntings."

"They are *not*," she stated firmly.

"They *are*," I stated more firmly.

And the resultant, quite enjoyable argument, lasted us through dinner and until bedtime.

It was at three in the morning that I was awakened.

There was that odd, grating noise coming from the living room. It was too loud to be made by a mouse or a rat and, so far as we knew, there were no possums in this inner suburb. Sally was still sleeping. She liked her sleep and hated to be disturbed. So, carefully, I slid out from between the sheets on my side of the bed, thrust my feet into my slippers, picked up my dressing gown from the chair and got into it. Somehow the thought of human intruders did not cross my mind. There was nothing in the house to tempt a burglar. All evidence to the contrary notwithstanding I was sure that I should find a possum in the living room. Or a family of possums.

I walked softly to the door, opened it.

There was moonlight coming through the front window, but its illumination was not necessary. The metal panels were glowing with their own light—a cold, blue luminescence. And they had torn themselves loose from their fastenings — that had been the noise that had disturbed me — and were moving, slowly, purposively.

I was afraid.

I was too afraid to cry out. All I could do was to stand there and watch the inanimate shockingly become animate, watch the panels slide and shift, stare as they arranged themselves into a hexagonal.

And then, immediately, the whining started — thin, high, almost supersonic at first. Thin and high it was and then,

as it became louder, its tone deepened, and as it deepened so the colour of the moonlight changed, became more and more ruddy until the room was filled with rose-tinted shadows.

Inside the hexagon the shadows shifted and stirred, coalesced, took form.

There was a woman there.

Tall she was, breasts high and proud under the loosely fitting sweater, legs long and slim in their tight jeans. Her pale golden hair was pulled back in a pony tail. There was a glittering, complex bracelet on her left wrist and with her right hand she did something to it, made some adjustment. The humming died to a barely audible murmur. She stooped gracefully, slid one of the panels aside and stepped into the room

"Made the scene, Dad," she announced.

I gaped at her.

"Don'tcha dig, man?" she demanded.

"I do not," I managed to say.

"A square," she stated rather than asked.

"You could call me that," I admitted.

Her wide, generous mouth displayed perfect teeth as she smiled. She said, "I was told that squares were a dying race in this period. It would seem that they are not."

"Far from it," I agreed.

She smiled again. "Let me introduce myself. I am Lorn Verrill. Doctor Lorn Verrill. The Time Warp is my invention." She waved a hand airily towards the panels. "I had to send the cage back first, of course, but it was broken up before I could follow it. I have been trying to reassemble it by remote control. At last I succeeded." She stood with her hands on her hips, surveying the room. "And so this is a typical twentieth century pad," she remarked.

"Not so typical!" snapped a sharp female voice.

I turned, saw that Sally had come out of the bedroom. She had put on her robe, but since it was transparent rather than translucent and worn over nothing at all the

effect was decorative but far from modest.

She demanded, "Peter, who is this woman?"

"Her name," I said carefully, "seems to be Lorn Verrill. *Doctor* Lorn Verrill." I babbled on. "A doctorate in physics, maybe, or philosophy . . ."

Lorn Verrill laughed pleasantly. "You assume too much, Peter. My degree is in one of the arts. D.I.D., if you must know."

I said, "But you must be a scientist That . . . That . . ." I gestured towards the broken hexagon. "That Time Warp . . ."

"Just a flair for the higher mathematics," she said modestly.

"Then what the hell does D.I.D. stand for?" demanded Sally crossly.

"Doctor of Interior Decorating, of course, duckie," said Lorn.

Sally swore softly and then went to the bookcase that afforded stowage for all sorts of things in addition to books. She opened the bottle locker door, poured herself a stiff whisky. She strode to the nearest chair, plumped down into it, regarded us balefully over the rim of her glass.

She said, "This is rather much. This is rather too much. I am woken up at half past three in the bloody morning and I find my husband entertaining a blonde beatnik who says that she's a D.D. . . ."

"Not D.D.," I corrected her. "D.I.D."

"So you're on her side. You would be." She lowered the level of the whisky in her glass appreciably. "How do you know she's not a ghost? Or something worse? Like . . . Like a succubus . . ."

"Whoever heard of a succubus wearing jeans?" I asked reasonably enough.

"There has to be a first time for everything. Anyhow, those jeans are so tight they might as well have been painted on."

"I wore what I thought would be an appropriate

costume for this century," Lorn Verrill told her stiffly.

"It could be appropriate at that," said Sally nastily.

"Your own attire," snapped the time traveller, "is hardly decent."

"This is my home," said Sally, "and I wear what I damn' well please inside these four walls. And if you don't like it—there's the door."

I decided that it was time to pour oil—or alcohol—on the troubled waters. And I wanted a drink myself. I asked our visitor, "Whisky? Rum?"

"In that rig," suggested Sally, "a glass of thick, treacly muscat might be the shot."

"We haven't got any," I said shortly. Then, "Brandy? Sherry? Port?"

"Brandy, if I may," said Lorn Verrill politely.

I poured two generous doilops into two snifters, handed one to Lorn Verrill. I refilled Sally's glass. I said, "Here's mud in your eye," but the two women ignored me.

"And now," said Sally, when gullets had been wetted, "perhaps you will favour us with an explanation. It had better be a good one."

"But it's all so simple," said the other. "My name is Lorn Verrill. I am a Doctor of Interior Decorating, but my hobby is the study of mathematics. I stumbled upon the principle of the Time Warp and, naturally, decided to use the device for my own professional ends—"

"Which are?" demanded Sally suspiciously.

"In my century there is a craze for old things. Really old. Period stuff. And I thought that I might be able to pick up such items cheaply in the Past. My Past."

Sally is a shrewd businesswoman. She said, "And how would you pay for your purchases?"

"Barter, of course. I shall have to operate through contacts who will give me what I want in return for what I give them. And they will be able to sell the merchandise from my century."

"What sort of merchandise?" I asked.

She extended her left hand. On her wrist, above that

intricate bracelet which we now recognized as a control panel in miniature, was a beautiful watch, a piece of personal machinery that was obviously of the highest quality.

"These timepieces," she told us. "Atomic powered. Virtually everlasting."

"What about something really good?" I asked her—although nobody could possibly have said that the watch was not good. "Anti-gravity, or the interstellar drive?"

"And shunt the world on to a different Time Track?" she countered. "No thanks. I like my world the way it is. I like me the way I am. But small luxury items will not influence the course of history."

"They will," I said, "if anybody opens 'em up to see what makes 'em tick."

"They will never go wrong," she assured me. "And they cannot be opened. And if anybody should try to break one open he will get no more than a blob of fused metal for his pains."

"Miss Verrill has something," said Sally thoughtfully.

"*If* she comes from the Future," I said, suddenly dubious.

"Switch on all the lights, Peter," ordered Sally. I obeyed her. "Look at that sweater," she said. "Look at those jeans . . ."

"What about them?"

"*Men*," said Sally scornfully. "It's obvious to the trained eye that those fabrics are far superior to any that we have. Superior—and different. Very different. That sweater, for example . . ."

"Venusian spider silk," Lorn Verrill told us.

"And the jeans?"

"Multicron."

"You see? Or don't you? Not that it matters." She turned again to our visitor. "Now, Miss Verrill, we're willing to go into business with you. Perhaps if you can give us some idea of what you want . . ."

"This is an exploratory trip, Mrs . . ."

"You can call me Sally."

"This is an exploratory trip, Sally, and my time is limited." She glanced either at the watch or the control panel on the bracelet, or at both. "But I have two hours in hand . . ."

"Get dressed, Peter!" Sally snapped. "You'll excuse us a few minutes, Lorn, won't you?"

"Help yourself to another drink if you like," I added.

"This is the chance of a lifetime!" Sally whispered fiercely, inserting a shapely leg into one leg of her own jeans

"It could be," I agreed. "But what will she want?"

"Just what everybody is wanting now. Hurry up, you clot!"

I hurried, Sally hurried. Together we almost ran back into the living room, were relieved to find Lorn Verrill still there. We swept her out of the back of the house and into the car. I ran to open the driveway gate—and then had to run to get aboard the vehicle as it charged out into the street. Then there was delay, for which I was cursed, when Lorn Verrill was obliged to get out of the front seat to allow me to get into the back. But we got under way and in a very short time had embarked upon a moonlight tour of Paddington.

That old iron lace, on the old, reconditioned terrace houses, was good. With its bright new paint it stood out bravely in the light of our headlamps, in the light of the full moon. I could hear Lorn Verrill exclaiming, "But this is lovely! What couldn't I do with that?" And I heard Sally say, "And the annoying part of it all is that only a few years ago this iron lace was regarded as rubbish. You could get it for nothing!"

And then the drive was over and we were pulling to a stop outside our house. Lorn Verrill was anxious and impatient, brushing past me as I opened the front door, running to her hexagon of metal panels. She was inside the hexagon, pulling the open panel into place, as Sally came in.

"Sorry," she called. "Time short. Can't stay. Thank you!"

The deep humming swelled in volume and the moonlight, and the light of the one lamp that we had left burning assumed a ruddy tinge. And then the humming became a thin, intolerable whine, painful to the ears, and the tall form of our visitor inside the cage flickered and faded, flickered and faded and was gone. And the lights were back to normal, and the room was normal save for the hexagonal grouping of the panels and there was an oppressive silence broken by Sally, who said, "We're on to a good thing, Peter, a good thing."

She's a good businesswoman, is Sally.

But interior decorators, even in this day and age, are good businesswomen too, and anybody with a Doctorate in that art or science must be an exceptionally good businesswoman.

We went back to bed to try to get some sleep—and surprisingly, we did sleep. And when the alarm clock awakened us we talked for a while to convince ourselves that we had not shared a particularly vivid dream.

Sally was first out of bed. I heard her cry out from the living room. I ran to see what it was that had excited and distressed her.

Our space divider was gone.

On the carpet, where its panels had been rearranged to form a hexagon, there were two parcels—a small one and a large one. And there was a very commonplace looking envelope addressed in a neat hand, *Peter and Sally.*

Sally tore open the envelope. Inside it was a single sheet of thick, creamy notepaper with an embossed letter heading. I read, over Sally's shoulder, *Lorn Verrill, D.I.D. Vegan Trust Building, Laurentian Square, Atlantia.* Underneath the address had been written, *The date doesn't matter.*

The letter itself was short and to the point.

Dear Peter and Sally,

Sorry to have to do this to you, but I'm not in business for my health and must buy in the cheapest

market as well as selling in the dearest. But please accept the accompanying small tokens of my regard.

Sincerely,

Lorn Verrill.

The wrapping of the parcels was a thick plastic that, once the seal was broken, vapourised into a fragrant mist. In the small one, addressed to myself, was one of the watches. In the larger one addressed to Sally, was a sweater of the Venusian spider silk and a pair of the multicron jeans.

It's a good watch. By any normal standards it's a perfect watch. And that spider silk sweater washes and wears and wears and still looks as new as it did the day it was unpacked. And multicron is indeed a miracle fabric; if the simple directions on the leaflet that came with the jeans are followed the garment can be made to change colour, as desired, with every wash, and can be shrunk to form matador pants or shorts, or lengthened to make elegant tapered slacks. (An industrial chemist of our acquaintance to whom Sally gave a snipping for analysis told us crossly, after spending a frustrating month working on it, that he was a chemist and not a nuclear physicist and pleaded with us to tell him where we had obtained the material).

But there's been no real pleasure from the gifts.

For one thing, we haven't been able to replace our space divider; iron lace is more fantastically expensive with every passing day. And it's vanishing. Have you noticed? On Thursday you might admire a terrace house with something especially elegant decorating its balcony, and on Friday that same terrace house will exhibit a glassed-in balcony, and that balcony will look as though it's been there for years. And you'll have the uneasy feeling that there's something wrong somewhere, or somewhen, and then decide that your memory is playing tricks on you.

And there seems to be a growing number of expensive looking wristwatches -watches without winding knobs, watches whose cases, although gleaming, show the subtle signs of years of wear. And Sally tells me that she is always

spotting women, middle-aged or elderly women, wearing skirts or dresses obviously made from multicron.

There's no doubt about it.

Somewhen in the Past that shrewd businesswoman from the Future has the game all laced up.

THE ARK OF JAMES CARLYLE

by Cherry Wilder

On the ninety first day of his Met. duty Carlyle stepped out of the hut and gazed desperately at the cloudless sky. There were no quogs to meet him on the platform; the oily purple sea sucked gently at the wooden piles, his instruments had assured him there was a light westerly breeze. His delusion persisted and he had nothing to support it . . . not even the tangible evidence of an aching bunion. He did not dare call the station How would he begin?

'Something tells me . . .'

He decided to walk round the island but he found an ancient quog, the one he called the Chief, squatting at the foot of the ladder. He beckoned him on to the platform. The quogs were cryptorchids so for all he knew perhaps this was a Chieftainess: it was difficult to tell.

When he had first taken up his duty, before the boat brought him to the island, he had seen Mary Long, a young anthropologist who had tagged along with the landing party to the plateau, sexing a herd of quogs. She walked among them, picking the creatures up and solemnly examining their genital pouches. She was engrossed in her work; twenty or thirty quogs surrounded her and gently stripped off every stitch of her clothing before Carlyle or the other men could intervene. They sat round her and stared, their luminous eyes full of innocent curiosity

Not a great deal of work had been done on quogs; they had been described as small land mammals, semi-erect bipeds, modified baboons. They were docile, certainly, and capable of performing many tasks; but they were also ugly, elusive and rank-smelling. Their odour had already ceased to bother Carlyle but he noticed that the quogs still kept upwind of *him*. He found himself describing them differently: they were like trolls, like squatting goblins, like little old men. At night he listened for one of their rare sounds, the qwok-qwok-qwok, hardly vocalised, that had given them their name.

The Chief, who was a big fellow, fully three feet tall, scrambled nimbly on to the platform.

'Where are the others?' asked Carlyle.

Every other day the platform had been lined with quogs who gave him berries, limpets, burrowing shrimps, in exchange for bacon cubes. He had tried them with everything he had: orange juice, vegetables, vitamins, but they liked the bacon best Now the Chief tried to explain their absence. He could be heard only by cupping his long bluish hands before his tiny slit of a mouth to amplify the sound, the way Carlyle made owl-hoots as a boy.

'Mee-haw,' boomed the Chief faintly.

At first Carlyle did not understand. The mee-haw was a tree; in fact it was the only tree. The vegetation on AC14 was low, luxuriant and undistinguished except for the mee-haw trees, which reared up, with straight trunk and spreading crown of leafy branches, one hundred metres and more above the bushy islands in the still, purple sea. The timber, resembling balsa, was particularly easy to work. The platform on which Carlyle had his Met. hut was made entirely of the single mee-haw tree that had grown on the tiny island. The quogs had wept to see it fall down. Carlyle had had the uneasy notion that the mee-haw tree might be sacred to them.

Now the Chief pointed to the island; Carlyle was shaken again by his crazy premonition.

'Come on,' he said.

He climbed down from the platform and followed the Chief up the brush covered slope All the quogs on the island, about thirty of them forming one family group, were huddled together on the broad stump of the mee-haw tree.

'Why?' asked Carlyle. 'Why?'

The Chief cupped his hands and answered with a third quog word.

Carlyle strained to catch it.

'Aw-kee?'

The quogs on the stump waved their fingers; this was a way of laughing. To Carlyle's surprise they all began to vocalise, even the babies, pale blue and completely hairless, cupping their tiny hands 'Aw-kee' was the nearest he could get to it.

'What's that?' asked Carlyle.

He already knew. He went into a mad pantomime, begging the quogs for confirmation, then he ran back to the Met. hut. He called the satellite without a glance at his instruments. He announced firmly.

'There's going to be a flood.'

The receiver crackled. What were his readings?

'The quogs told me,' said Carlyle.

The crackle became indignant. Readings please. Carlyle turned hopelessly towards his instrument panel and his heart pounded The barometer had dropped thirty degrees and was still falling. The wind had swung round to the south. The room became dark as he completed his report and huge drops of rain began a tattoo on the roof of the Met. hut.

He ran out on to the platform. The sky was a dome of blue-black cloud above a darkening sea; the waves flashed emerald and purple-black and broke in iridescent foam upon the shore. The word for it, Carlyle decided, was unearthly. Already drenched to the skin he cowered in the doorway of the hut. He was worried about the quogs; he guessed that their instinct to seek higher ground would keep them huddled on the mee-haw stump. The fragile

shelters where they slept and did their weaving would be no protection against this rain. The picture of the quogs twisting their endless ropes from native flax lingered in his mind. He wished, idly, that the mee-haw tree had not been cut down.

Carlyle gave a cry: 'The tree!'

He peered out into the downpour, staring up at the dark centre of the island where the mighty mee-haw tree had stood, ready to shelter the quogs in its dense foliage. They made ropes . . . probably sent up a young male to loop slings over the branches, then the whole tribe went up.

There was a splashing and scrabbling at the foot of the platform. Carlyle knelt down and saw the Chief, already swimming awkwardly; the water had risen three feet in twenty minutes. The rain was a blinding cataract; a man who lay on his back would drown, thought Carlyle. He dragged the old quog aboard and bundled him into the hut. They sat gasping, the water pouring from the quog's grizzled hide, from Carlyle's coveralls.

'How far?' gasped Carlyle. 'How high does the water . . .?' He gestured with a horizontal hand, staring into the Chief's bulging dark eyes.

Carlyle was suddenly aware of an earlier moment. When the mee haw tree came down . . . the day the quogs wept . . he and Ensign Weiss noticed marks on its great trunk. A series of wavy bands, between three and four metres from the lowest branches . . . more than eighty metres from the ground. Carlyle understood, with another thump of fear . . . water marks. The water would rise until only the mee haw tops rose like islands out of the purple sea. The only high ground on the entire planetoid was the plateau where his expedition had touched down briefly, far to the north. It had a large quog population . . . and no mee-haw trees.

The Chief touched Carlyle's knee gently with the tip of his prehensile tail.

'Sure,' said Carlyle. 'Sure. We have a real problem here, old buddy.'

He was calculating . . . One life-raft, inflatable, fully provisioned and powered, capacity six humans. All he had to do was launch the thing. And figure out some way of transporting thirty quogs to the plateau. The receiver gave his call signal but Carlyle paid no attention. He rushed out on to the platform again, into the deluge, and saw with alarm that the water was up to the cross supports. The scrap of beach and the lowest rank of undergrowth were already submerged. Sea and sky were joined in a blue-black curtain of moisture. Suddenly Carlyle gave a triumphant cry that brought the old quog scuttling to his side, he had realised that they were standing upon a raft.

He explained it to the Chief as he dug out the axe. The tribe must come aboard now, pronto; when the water rose he would knock out the supports of the platform and they would be launched. The wind and the current were driving towards the plateau . . . Maybe they could use the power pack of his own inflatable boat . . .

'Come on!' he shouted. 'We have to get them aboard!'

The Chief had been dancing and shivering at Carlyle's side, stretching out his arms to the island. He pointed through the rain and Carlyle saw that the quogs were coming.

It made sense of course; the platform *was* a little higher than the top of the island. They came swarming through the bushes and flung themselves gamely into the water. Their awkward quog-paddle was very efficient; the first wave—pregnant females and mothers with babies on their backs—was already nosing towards the supports. The turbid water was alight with their bulbous eyes. Carlyle knelt down beside the Chief and began to heave the dripping creatures aboard. More than once Carlyle saw a big quog dive and drag up a half drowned cub. The oldest animals took it pretty hard, they fought to stay on land; but the younger ones thrust them brutally into the water. All along the platform in the plunging rain the rest of the tribe were gently dancing and stamping, reaching out their arms in encouragement to those still in the water.

As the last of them were dragged aboard Carlyle herded them into the Met. hut and went over the side with the axe. The Chief and four husky off-siders watched him wallowing in water up to his neck and hammering with the back of the axehead at one of the supports. The mee-haw piles had been embedded in heavy silt to a depth of two metres. Carlyle reckoned he could slide the tops of the piles out of the groove cut for them in the platform. But the first pile moved inward with a lurch the moment he hit it; he saw that the silt was swirling away in clouds as the water rose. He was treading water now, catching an occasional foothold on a rock. He moved under the platform, beat at the pile with the axehead, then heaved it outward with all his strength.

As the silt let go its hold the pile swung upwards in the water and the platform sagged down at one corner. Instantly two quogs were in the water grasping the mee-haw pile and using it to restore balance. Carlyle swam to the diagonal under the far corner of the hut and knocked it out like a loose tooth; two more quogs hove up out of the rain and balanced the platform. Carlyle knocked out the remaining leeward pile and felt the whole structure buckle and shift. He yelled to the quogs and scrambled back on to the platform. The decking heaved about crazily. The last pile on the seaward side gave way. Carlyle watched his two pairs of assistants climb expertly inboard and tapped the loose piles free of their grooves as they rode up on the surface of the flood. Leaning down he caught hold of one long pile as it clung to the side of the platform and shoved off from the island. The quogs on deck gathered to help him, bracing their leathery underbodies against the pole; the platform shuddered, then settled gently. The wind was rising and a strong current ran to the north. The mee-haw raft floated free upon the waste of waters.

Carlyle and his deck hands carefully drew in their oar; he felt an extraordinary sense of well-being as they clustered around his knees. The rain had slackened but they still

pressed forward into a wall of water. A gleam of violet penetrating the low ceiling of black cloud showed that the Star was shining. Carlyle glanced down at the Chief, who blinked solemnly through the rain. He remembered that he must answer the call signal and led the way into the Met. hut.

The quogs had packed themselves in snugly under the big plastic dome. Carlyle couldn't think of any species who could carry off the situation better. Humans? Monkeys? Bedlam and filth. Okay, the quogs were a spooky lot, and the smell, *en masse*, was like camphorated garlic, but there were times when he appreciated their stillness, the way they organised themselves. He lifted aside a tiny blue paw, resting on the communicator, and called the satellite.

The signal was faint.

'Readings . . .'

He gave the readings.

'We observe dense cloud,' pipped the signal. 'Evaluate.'

Carlyle switched over to voice, although he didn't like talking to the computer He made a report. The androgynous voice snapped.

'Evacuate. Use liferaft.'

Carlyle said. 'The emergency is way past that point. I have evacuated the native population '

The quogs were vocalising gently in the background . . . qwok-qwok-qwok . . There was static, the voice signal was faint.

'Follow emergency procedures. No record . . . population. Save . . self . . . data.'

Carlyle repeated stolidly. 'Evacuating with quogs.'

'Follow . . procedures. No deviation . . losing contact.'

Carlyle said coarsely: 'Screw yourself tin-brain. Give me emergency voice contact.' He slammed the red button and Garrett answered.

'Jim . . . Jim? What the hell is going on down there?'

Carlyle gave his report all over again; the reply was broken and distant.

'We're losing signal.' Garrett was worried. 'What in blazes are you doing with those quogs?'

'Evacuating them. The island is submerged by now I guess.'

'But *why?* This is no time . . . Tough luck . . . the quogs. No ethnological value . . . plenty more . . .'

'Hell!' said Carlyle 'We cut down their tree!'

'Jim!' cried Garrett, with the static closing in. 'Take care . . . crazy raft . . . Can't allow . . . deviation emergency procedures.' The receiver went dead.

Carlyle felt a surge of panic as if his lifeline had snapped. His morale sagged at the thought of the satellite . . . warmth, filtered air, human company . . . He felt his conditioning slipping away. He was on the verge of apophobia, Weltraumangst, the fear that grew in interstellar space from contemplating vast distances. He remembered poor Ed Kravetts, a cadet in his year who tried to cover up a bad case of 'Yonders'. He staggered through his classes on the station red-eyed and queasy; a glance at one of the monitors made him sweat; the checking of an air-lock or a simple space walk left him shocked and pale. To see Kravetts struggling with a quantum equation was to apprehend the void: all the black miles that separated them from the tiny spinning globe of earth, a pin-point of light seen through the wrong end of a telescope.

Carlyle dragged himself back to his own world. 'Identify with the place you're in,' wasn't that Eva's way of saying it? Eva, E.M., Earth Mother, Commander Magnussen, come beautiful Eva, aid me now. He sent his prayer off into deep space and doled out bacon cubes to all hands before striding out on deck. The rain had really eased off and the cloud was lifting. The mee-haw raft rushed on faster than before. With the current and a rising wind they were making maybe five knots. The Star was down; the brief blue night had settled on AC14.

The Chief leaned on his knuckle-pads beside Carlyle; they stared together over the wine-dark sea. Low waves

came at the raft from the south-west, as the wind swung round. They were long, uncrested hillocks of water, that surged under the mee haw logs and disappeared into the dusk, rolling in line across the surface of the endless sea.

'Those waves better keep low,' said Carlyle. 'Does the sea get rough?'

In his ninety-one days of Met. duty he had never seen a choppy sea, never felt a drop of rain, never observed a significant drop in barometric pressure. He made wave-motions with his hands and the Chief replied with 'Aw-kee' and some new words. He thought of the sea rising up into roaring crests, high over the raft, huge rollers, hills and valleys where the pink foam boiled. He had to shut his eyes to shake off the nightmare picture of those waves, superimposed upon the harmless scene he was watching.

'I better get some sleep,' Carlyle muttered. He was wet and shaky, his morale still down. The whole project, the solitary Met. duty, was a test of his survival qualities and his potential as a colonist. Perhaps he had blown it with Garrett by evacuating the quogs . . . He stumbled back into the hut, found a way to his bunk, put on a fresh warm coverall from the thermopack. He didn't dare take any medication in case there was a sudden alert. Most of the quogs were sleeping; he caught the gleam of an eye here and there, the flicker of a blue hand. The Chief materialised at the foot of his bunk with two even more ancient creatures, so old that their skin was grey. They stared at Carlyle and clapped their long hands soundlessly. He felt an instant of revulsion . . . sleeping in a hut crammed with animals, for crissake. Then with a surge of weariness and a sense of strange well-being he fell asleep.

. . . He was wide awake in a dark room with a low ceiling. A range of scents and sounds assailed him: fresh air, woodsmoke, perfume, the waffling roar of a jet refuelling, insects, someone strumming idly on a moog. Earth. He was on Earth. Carlyle knew that he must be dreaming; he savoured his dream, taking in the outlines of

the room. It was night; he was standing beside a window that opened onto a balcony. He glanced down at the thick, unpatterned carpet. A memory stirred. Had he been in this room before? Or was it simply the colour, a rippling mist-green, an earth colour. There was someone at the desk; Carlyle felt himself drift closer

He peered at the dark figure . . . A caftan, a long fall of dark hair, he couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Yet something in the attitude of the head made him tremble, in his dream. Slowly Eva Magnussen turned until she saw him. She blinked into the darkness of the room, switched off her cassette and removed the earpiece as he had seen her do a thousand times.

'Jim?' her voice was husky, hesitant. 'Jim Carlyle?'

'Eva?' In the dream his own voice was muffled.

'Where are you?' she asked. 'Is this some kind of experiment?'

'It's my dream,' he said. 'You know where I am.'

'Jim . . . I can *see* you.'

'I thought of you,' he said. 'I have a situation going here. My communications are gone. No word from upstairs. Seeing you helps a lot.'

'You're not alone,' she said. 'Who are they?'

'Quogs,' he said. 'They are great little guys. You might find a short report on them in the file on AC'14. Not enough work done on quogs.'

'You say you are sleeping?'

'Sure. Eva the sea is purple. Wine-dark sea . . .'

'Oh, Jim . . .'

'Don't!' he said. 'Eva . . . Don't cry. Think about what I said. I'm not one of your cadets any more. We could take a colonial posting.'

Then as she rose in her chair the dream tilted; he was looking down on the room. He saw the figure of Eva Magnussen, his instructress, Commander Magnussen M.D., specialist in space psychology, rise up from her chair and run forward on the green carpet. He felt an instant of amazement and fear . . . it was like watching

something else . . . real life . . . not a dream. He heard Eva cry out across the abyss of space and time:

'Jim . . . Jim Carlyle . . . I love you . . .'

Then the dream vanished in a swirl of colour and scent; he was back in the dark, in the flood, in the crowded Met. hut, with the quogs whistling in anxiety and the Chief tugging his arm.

'Okay!' said Carlyle. 'I see what's wrong.'

Rain was falling heavily again; the wind had become violent and ripped one of the panels out of the hut. The raft was bumping about in the water as the wind tore inside under the dome.

'I'll relax the panels,' said Carlyle to the Chief. 'I may need your team.'

The Chief summoned them up in the eerie violet light of dawn, while the rest of the passengers cowered away from the driving rain.

Carlyle went to work on the expanding ribs holding the panels. The hut began to fold down and the raft settled. Finally he grappled with the damaged panel, but he had the order wrong. He had been too busy providing shelter for the quogs—the torn panel should have been folded down first. He felt a thrill of warning, the eyes of the quogs glowed around him, he shot up a hand and turned sideways. The heavy strut holding one side of the panel broke with a rending crack and came down on his head. Carlyle's last conscious thought was: 'I am seeing stars . . .'

He was out, but not out cold for very long. He groped upwards towards consciousness through a fog of nausea and pain. Words whirled through the aching sunburst of his brain; he strove to move his legs, his hands, his fingers, to wrest open his leaden eyelids. He saw pictures . . . ragged scraps of film . . . the island, the satellite, a house in a green field . . . where? He felt himself, flying, moving, uplifted . . . lifted by a hundred strong, blue hands. He could see them so clearly through his closed eyelids. Whoever had blue hands . . .? He remembered and laughed in his pain-fringed dream. 'Their hands were blue . . . and

they went to sea . . they went to sea in a sieve.'

Carlyle opened his eyes. He was on his bunk, the quogs all around him, their saucer eyes alight with concern.

'Concussion,' mumbled Carlyle. 'Got to take—medication.' He could not reach his head but the Chief guided his hand. There was a shallow two-inch cut on his scalp above the left ear and blood had soaked and matted his shaggy crop of hair, known in the service as the colonist's cut or the Buffalo Bill.

'Must take—antibiotic.'

Carlyle was heavily conditioned to protect himself against alien bacteria. He fought to stay conscious.

'Hogan . . .' he whispered to the Chief. 'Hogan the Medic. Up there. He can tell me what to take . . .'

He sank into a confused nightmare of purple microbes and the capsules in his medical pack.

Carlyle's head ached still and he began this comical dream. He was in a cabin on the satellite, lying just above the floor, floating. It was some guy's bedroom, with his locker, pinups, a green video cassette. He heard startled voices and saw two people sitting up in the bunk, clutching the sheet around them.

'Hi Mary!' said Carlyle in his muffled dream voice. 'No clothes again!'

'Carlyle . . . what the hell!'

It was Dick Hogan the Medic, naked too and for some reason frightened.

'Hogan!' cried Carlyle. 'You're just the guy I wanted to see.'

'Carlyle?' whispered Mary Long, the blonde anthropologist, 'Is it you, Jim?'

'Sure,' said Carlyle. 'I'm dreaming. I do a lot of dreaming down here. I have a concussion, Dick. Little cut on my scalp . . .'

The two lovers sat there petrified, unable to move. Carlyle laughed and could not make it out. He wasn't about to report them for fraternising.

'Come on now!' He laughed, weakly. 'What do I take,

Dick? Not functioning too well . . what antibiotic . . . the label . . .?'

'UCF,' said Hogan automatically. 'You know that. Orange capsules.'

'Thanks . '

Then Mary Long pointed and began to scream.

'Quogs! I can see quogs!'

And the dream swirled away taking Carlyle with it.

After he got the Chief to feed him the orange capsules he slept long and heavily while his head mended. He woke at night, out on deck, with the raft still moving steadily in the grip of the current. They passed islands—no, not islands, but the tops of mee haw trees, and on the raft the quogs danced, holding out their hands to the distance, to their brothers in the dripping branches. He woke in the hut and saw a patch of indigo sky with the Star shining down Carlyle turned to the Chief; he was still light-headed.

'Far and Few . . .' said Carlyle. 'How does it go?' He struggled drowsily on to one elbow.

Few and far, Far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live.
Their heads were green, and their hands were blue,
And they went to sea in a sieve.

Carlyle was laughing and the quogs waved their fingers.

In his sleep he heard someone calling his name; he woke up and found the Chief, vocalising through his hands

'Cah-lah-ee!'

'Good try,' said Carlyle, flexing his limbs and feeling stronger.

He pointed to the Chief, who slid across his nictitating eyelids in a show of quog bashfulness.

'Tell me *your* name,' urged Carlyle.

The old quog boomed shyly: 'Sheef.'

Chief. The name Carlyle had given him, though he didn't recall ever calling him that, unless in his delirium.

He let it go, puzzled. Either the quogs had no names or they were like cats, who had special sounds they used to communicate with humans.

Carlyle checked his instruments; the stormy conditions were abating. A mee-haw off to port showed a fraction of trunk. The flood waters were beginning to recede. His chronometer told him he had been out of action for three days. The Star hung low in a sky of aquamarine; he saw the plateau dead ahead with the black cliffs rising up sheer. The current was no more than a ripple and the mee-haw raft moved sluggishly through the purple water.

He checked the plateau through his glasses, trying to make out a possible landing-place that he remembered where broken columns of black basalt had made an alien giant's causeway. He saw a disturbance in the water, a line of foam. Before he could register it properly he sensed the anxiety of the quogs, growing into fear. Behind him they huddled and whistled, crowding into the ragged heap of the Met. hut. He stood on the raft, sandwiched between two shock waves . . . the low wedge of foam moving towards them and the almost palpable fear given off by the quogs.

'What is it?' cried Carlyle.

The Chief, all of them, could give no answer, only this immense welling up of terror. Carlyle gazed at them blankly. A whale? A giant ray? The Great Horned Toad? He pushed through the crowd and took down a regulation magnum; then as an after-thought he reached down the new Fernlich, the automatic missile carbine. As he feathered its vents he heard the sound, a high vibrant scale of notes, swinging up and down on impossible frequencies. He might have heard it before, far out on the sea at night, so sweet and distant that it could be something he imagined. The quogs writhed in fear and pain, clasping their hands over their round ears, burrowing under the paraphernalia in the hut.

Carlyle rushed out into the waves of strange music. The ripple had divided into ten, a dozen pink clumps of foam,

approaching swiftly on all sides. He could almost see them now . . . not too large, dark shapes swimming easily . . . like seals, maybe, or dolphins, slipping, weaving, gliding, just below the surface of the water. Carlyle squatted on the deck, fascinated. The music thrilled around him, his head sang, he felt dizzy. A young quog, crouched at the doorway of the hut, rolled over and died.

Carlyle sprang up, gasping. With an audible pop something reared up out of a patch of foam. A smooth pink bubble . . . At first he thought incredulously of a child's toy space helmet, then he saw that it was a bubble of foam The bubble burst and a sleek black head appeared. It did look like a seal but the coat was scaly, black crystalline scales, dark mother-of-pearl, breaking the blush light into an alien spectrum. The creature was dancing on its tail, waving sleek webs like forepaws, only a few metres from the raft Then, with a glissando of sound, infinitely sweet, like a peal of electronic bells, a single scaly tentacle whipped out from a curled position below the head and seized the body of the dead quog The seal-lizard flipped its catch into the air and caught it playfully There was a flash of teeth, a minor chord, the quog's head was bitten off. A whistle of anguish rose from the burrowing terrified quogs crammed inside the hut. Carlyle shouted at the top of his voice.

The creatures had never heard a human voice. There was an excited humming, a swish of dark bodies passing around and under the raft. A colony of pink bubbles grew to starboard, at a safe distance. The seal lizards repeated what he recognised vaguely as the tone and pitch of his own voice. They boomed and cawed, bouncing about in the water. Carlyle accepted the invitation; he called again, telling them to clear off. The formation of bubbles began to move closer, tinkling, humming . . . testing . . . testing . . .

With a ringing head Carlyle realised what they were trying to find. The raft was drifting closer to the plateau; he grasped the oar, still lying on deck, and began to drive

the clumsy craft along. He would never escape this way before the seal-lizards found *his* death frequency—the sound which would make this new creature with the harsh, loud voice fall down to be eaten. The seal-lizards moved alongside in formation. The noise was unbearable; Carlyle sang, groaned, shouted aloud. A tentacle, then another, flicked over the timbers of the raft, plucked at his boots, probed towards the quogs in the hut.

Carlyle dropped his oar and fired the magnum in the air. The seal lizards hesitated, then pressed forward. A new wave of sound broke over the raft; he screamed and rolled upon the deck, pressing his hands over his ears. Through the mists of agonising sound he saw the seal lizards at the very edge of the boat. A row of neat, scaly black heads; narrow oval eyes, a structure of nasal beak and leathery appendages like whiskers . . . even so close they looked amazingly like seals. He could not see how they made their music. Their comical mouths opened upon murderous fangs. A tentacle gripped his wrist and pulled gently.

Roaring aloud to counteract their killing whine Carlyle put one hand to the missile carbine and fired point-blank along the deck. A seal-lizard was blasted into mush. The missile that destroyed it passed on across the sea, then struck and exploded, sending up a column of water, fifty metres away.

There was a moment of utter silence, then the whole band of seal lizards dived like one creature. It could have been the shock-wave that did it, or the sound of the carbine, or simply the death of one of their number. Rising to his knees Carlyle saw them emerge far beyond the raft swimming in formation, fast and low . . . a ripple bearing away to the south west. He caught only a few notes of their music across the dark waters.

The quogs crept out and surrounded him, helping him to stand. Everyone, Carlyle included, was partially deaf from the encounter. The quogs held their heads sideways and bounced on one leg, like a human bather with water in his ear. Carlyle shook hands with the Chief; it caught on.

The whole party, dizzy with relief, shook hands promiscuously.

They were already within the shadow of the plateau Carlyle and his crew, working the oar, struck a rock or a shoal, then another. They were over the flooded causeway where he had embarked for the island three months ago. He levered the raft in towards a rock platform. The quogs had begun to stamp gently and hold out their hands to the plateau.

One moment there was no sign of life, only the glittering planes of the great stone mesa; the next, every plane and slope was alive with quogs. They spilled over the edge of the plateau in waves, until the black rock was blanketed with brown and grey and tawny fur. A strange noise, stranger even than the music of the seal lizards, began to rise up from the multitude. They vocalised all together, by tens and hundreds, their weak voices blending into a vast muffled shout, that echoed out over the purple flood tide and reverberated from the chasms of the plateau.

'CAH-LAH-EE.'

As his own quogs pressed round him proudly, in silence, Carlyle recognised his own name. Then as the shout redoubled. 'CAH-LAH-EE,' he saw himself as a new creature, as the quogs perceived him: the clumsy, loud-voiced, white-handed giant of a new species. The dogged Cah lah-ee, who made a marvellous craft from the looted remains of a mee-haw tree, who overcame the flood, did battle with seal-lizards and brought a whole tribe to safety

The raft sidled into the platform and a nylon rope fell on the deck. The quogs were so thick that Carlyle had not seen the landing party, Garrett, Hogan and Weiss. The sight of these men, his own kind, affected him powerfully. His sense of proportion was restored; he smiled and choked up, just as they all did. He felt as if he had returned from some other dimension, not a routine stint on AC11.

'Hey there!' cried Garrett. 'Some welcome you got here, Lieutenant.'

'Am I glad to see you!' said Carlyle.

They heaved him ashore; the quogs were whisked off the raft by hundreds of willing hands.

Carlyle turned back to the Chief.

'See the raft is made fast,' he said.

The men of the landing party turned back and watched as the Chief and his off siders tied up to a pillar of rock.

'Everything ship-shape!' said Dick Hogan.

'They know the ropes,' said Carlyle.

The party ascended through an aisle of quogs, still hooting his name; Carlyle acknowledged the applause as modestly as he could. He was looking ahead eagerly . . . Yes, there was the landing module on the plateau, among the bushes and the stony burrows of the upland quogs. He was going upstairs, back to the station. His limbs began to ache in anticipation of a steam bath and a bunk.

'How's the head?' asked Hogan.

'Oh fine,' said Carlyle. 'It was just a simple concussion.'

Garrett turned to him.

'You get it, don't you, Jim? You understand what you've discovered.'

'I think so,' said Carlyle. 'I guess I knew all along. Or when they called out my name . . . Did you know it was my name?'

'We worked it out.' They laughed and looked at Carlyle expectantly, waiting for him to bell the cat.

'The quogs are able to transmit pictures,' said Carlyle. 'They are natural telesends'

'The first in the Universe,' said Garrett.

'There's more to it than that, Max,' said Carlyle. 'Some kind of group intelligence . . .'

'They had us on the hop upstairs!' put in Weiss.

'What way?' asked Carlyle.

'Reports of hallucinations,' said Garrett. 'Weiss here saw you on the raft. Hogan . . .'

'I saw Hogan,' said Carlyle 'Spoke to him. I thought it was a dream.'

He and Hogan exchanged glances, straight-faced; no

one said a word about Mary Long. The quogs certainly had a trick of embarrassing that girl.

'Communication can extend over vast distances,' said Max Garrett.

He was smiling in an odd way; the men were still watching Carlyle closely. He couldn't read much in their faces, no pictures came to him; for a moment he wished they were quogs. Hogan dug him in the ribs.

'You got the prize, boy,' he said.

Garrett cleared his throat.

'We had word. Commander Eva Magnussen put in a report. She has also requested a P.I.C. with Lieutenant Carlyle.' A Personal Interplanetary Communication: something flashed from Earth to Armstrong Base to a chain of a hundred satellites. It was the spaceman's version of compassionate leave; marriages were contracted, births and deaths announced in this way. 'She has requested a colonial posting.'

Carlyle smiled foolishly and the men all shook him by the hand.

They were anxious to get him upstairs to sick bay, but Carlyle excused himself and turned aside. He bent down to the nearest quog.

'Where is my friend the Chief?'

There was an immediate response in the scattered groups of quogs returning up the sides of the plateau. A strong impulse, stronger perhaps because of the numbers involved, directed him to a low cave some distance away. He strode over and found the Chief, with his wives and children, being regaled with berries and limpets and sweet bark. He realised that he had been aware for some time that the Chief was in fact a male; he found no difficulty in sexing quogs at a glance. The Chief knew that he was leaving.

'I'll come back after a few days,' said Carlyle.

The pair of them stood in a clear space, looking out from the height of the plateau. The three giant causeways in the rock were explained, three great chutes that

drained off the deluge of rain from the high ground. The purple sea spread out beneath them; the mee-haw trees marked the submerged islands. In a series of quick superimpositions Carlyle saw the great day when the flood receded altogether; when the Star approached its apogee and the islands became dry land again.

'Yes,' he said. 'I'll be back to see that.'

As he turned to rejoin the landing party Carlyle took in the scene. The three men beside their vehicle, tall visitors in regulation silversuits, and a fourth man, unkempt and hairy, in ragged coveralls, communing at a distance with the members of a new species. The men looked curiously towards Carlyle, their anxiety did not quite diminish as he came closer. The distance between Carlyle and the landing party could not be taken up in a few small steps. They saw tomorrow's man, who by some chance operation of goodwill, some accident of understanding, reached forward into new modes of being.

THE MAN OF SLOW FEELING

by Michael Wilding

After the accident he lay for weeks in the still white ward. They fed him intravenously but scarcely expected him to live. Yet he did live, and when at last they removed the bandages from his eyes, it was found he could see. They controlled what he could see carefully, keeping the room dimmed, the blinds down, at first; but gradually increased his exposure to light, to the world around. Slowly his speech came back. He blocked for some time on words he could not remember, could no longer enunciate; but gradually his vocabulary returned. But he had lost sensation, it seemed. He could not smell the flowers Maria brought into the small private ward. And when she gave him the velvety globed petals to touch, he could not feel them. All foods were the same to him. The grapes she mechanically bought, he could only see. They had neither touch nor taste for him. If he shut his eyes and returned to darkness again, he did not know what he was eating. Yet he was not totally without sensation — it was not as if he were weightless or bodiless. He was conscious of lying in bed day after day, his body lying along the bed – perhaps because the constant pressure reached through to his numbed nerves. But the touch of Maria's fingers on his cheeks, the kiss of her lips against his, he could not feel, nor mouth the taste of her.

And yet as he lay alone in that small white room odd

sensations came to him, brushed him with their dying wings. As if, lying there with only his thoughts and imaginings, he could conjure back the taste of grapes, the soft touch of Maria's hand, the searching pressure of her kiss. They surprised him, these sensations; often they would make him wake from a slight sleep as if a delightful dream had achieved an actuality: but when he awoke he was always totally alone, and remembered nothing of any dream. It was often, as he lay there, as if someone had actually touched him, or forced grapes against his palate, and he would want to cry out at the unexpectedness of it. If imagination, it could only have been triggered by the workings of his subconscious. He mentioned it to the nurses, and they said that it could be that he was getting his sensations back. He did not argue with them, pointing out that there were no correlatives to the sensations, no objects provoking them. It was like a man feeling pain in a foot already amputated: a foot he would not be getting back. The sensations were the ghosts of feelings he had once had, nerve memories of a lost past.

Released from hospital, Maria took him back to the house in the country. They made love that first night, but he could not feel her full breasts, her smooth skin, and making love to her was totally without sensation for him. Its only pleasures were voyeuristic and nostalgic: his eyes and ears allowed him to remember past times—like seeing a sexual encounter at the cinema. The thought came to him that the best way to get anything from sex now was to cover the walls and ceilings with mirrors, so that at least he could have a full visual satisfaction to replace his missing senses. But he said nothing to Maria. He said nothing, but he knew she realized that for him it was now quite hopeless.

He was woken in the night by a dream of intercourse, the excitement of fondling a body, the huge relief of orgasm. He lay awake, the vividness of it reminding him bitterly of what was now lost to him.

The early days back in the house he found disorienting.

Within the white walls confining the ward experience had been limited for him; he saw little, encountered little, the disturbing nerve memories were few. But released, now they swelled to a riot, as if exposure to the open world had revived dormant, dying memories for their final throes. Released, his body was a continual flux of various sensations, of smell, of taste, of touch; yet still with no sensations from his experiences. He could walk beside the dung heap at the field's corner, ready to manure the land, and though he inhaled deeply hoping its pungency would break through his numbness, he could experience nothing. When Maria was not looking, he reached his hand into the dung: he felt nothing. A visual repugnance, but no physical sensation, no recoil of nausea.

Yet at tea suddenly the full pungency of the foul dung swept across to him, his hand unfeelingly holding a meringue was swamped in the heavy foul stickiness of the dung. He left the table, walked across to the window that looked out onto the wide lawns. There was nothing outside to provoke his sensations; and if there had been, how could his touch have been affected from outside? His touch and smell had not, as he'd momentarily hoped, returned. Maria asked what was the matter, but he said nothing. He went to the bathroom, but oddly did not feel nausea. He expected to, biting that momentarily dung drenched meringue. But his stomach recorded no sensations. His intellect's interpretation had misled him, his mind was interpreting a nausea he would have felt, in his past life, an existence no longer his.

Yet in bed as he reached out to fondle, hopelessly, Maria who made love with him now more eagerly, more readily, more desperately, uselessly, pointlessly than ever before, his stomach was gripped by a sudden retching nausea, and he had to rush to the bathroom to vomit.

"My poor dear," said Maria, "oh my poor dear."

He wondered whether he should rest again, to recover the placidity he had known in the hospital. But to rest in bed,

although he could read or hear music, meant his life was so reduced. At least to walk round the fields or into the village gave him stimulation for those senses that remained.

But activity seemed disturbing. And provoked a riot of these sense memories, these million twitching amputated feet.

Then, one day, he realized his senses were not dead.

It was a compound realization, not a sudden epiphany. In the morning he had driven the car and going too fast over the humpbacked bridge that crossed the canal, had provoked a scream from Maria. He had asked in alarm what was the matter

"Nothing," she said, "it's just that it took the bottom out of my stomach, going over the bridge like that."

"I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't realize I was going that fast. I can't feel that sort of thing now."

Indeed he had forgotten, till she reminded him, that the sensation existed.

They made love at noon, not because he could experience anything, but because in his dreams and in his waking nerve memories, he so often re-experienced the ecstasy in actuality denied him. He perhaps half hoped to recapture the experience. But never did.

Maria got up to cook lunch, absurdly spending great labour on foods he could not taste, perhaps hoping to lure his taste from its grave. She rushed from the kitchen to his bed when he gave a sudden cry. But he was laughing when she reached the bedroom.

"Sorry," he said. "It's just that like you said your stomach dropped out going over the bridge, and that must have reminded me of it. It just happened this minute, lying here."

She touched his brow with her cool hand, whose coolness and presence he could not feel. He brushed her away, irritated by her solicitude. As he ate his lunch, he brooded over his cry of alarm. And later, buying cigarettes in the village shop, for the nervous habit he realized that

had always caused him to smoke, not the taste, he came on the truth as his body was suffused with the sudden aliveness of intercourse, the convulsive ecstasy of orgasm.

"Are you all right, sir?" the shopkeeper asked.

"I'm fine, fine," he said. "It's, it's" (it's nothing he was about to say mechanically, but it was ecstasy); "it's quite all right," he said.

Walking back, he was elated at realizing sensation was not denied him, but delayed. He looked at his watch and predicted he would taste his lunch at four o'clock. And sitting on the stile at the field corner, he did. In excitement he ran, his meal finished, to tell Maria, to tell her ecstatically that the accident had not robbed him of sensation, but dulled and slowed its passage along his nerves. When he tripped on a log and grazed his knee without any feeling, he knew, ambivalently that in three hours the pain would be registered: he waited in excitement for confirmation of his prediction, in anxiety about the pain it would bring.

But his knowledge was a doubtful advantage. The confusions of senses before had been disturbing, but not worrying. It was the prediction now that tore him with anxiety. Cutting his finger while sharpening a pencil, he waited tense for the delayed pain, and even though cutting his finger was the slightest of hurts, it filled three hours of anxiety. He worked out with Maria that the well-timed cooking of food could appetize his tasteless smelless later meal; but few meals could produce rich smells three hours before serving. He could not do anything the slightest nauseating, like cleaning drains or gutting chickens, for fear of the context in which his senses would later register and produce in their further three hours the possibility of his vomiting. Defecation became nightmarish, could ruin any ill-timed meal, or intercourse. And ill timed intercourse would ruin any casual urination. He toyed with the idea of keeping a log book, so that by consulting

what happened three hours back, he knew what he was about to feel. He experimented one morning, and in a sort of way it worked. For he spent so long noting down each detail in his book, he had little time to experience anything. He realized how full a life is of sensations, as hopelessly he tried to record them all.

He developed a device, instead, consisting primarily of a small tape-recorder which he carried always with him. He spoke a constant commentary into it of his sensate actions and, through earphones, his commentary would be played back to him after a three hours delay, to warn him of what he was about to feel. The initial three hours, as he paced the fields, were comparatively simple, though he worried at the limitations it would impose on his life and experience, having to comment on it in its entirety, each trivial stumble, each slight contact. But after three hours had passed, and his bruised slow nerves were transmitting his sensations, the playback came in And he found he could not both record his current activities in a constant flow, and hear a constant commentary on his three hours back activities, momentarily prior to his sensations of those past ones. He braced himself for the predicted sensation that his recorded voice warned him of, and in doing so forgot to maintain his current commentary for his three hours hence instruction. And maintaining his commentary, he forgot to act on the playback and lost the value of its warnings. And recurring again to it, intent on gaining from its predictions, he began to follow its record as instructions, and when he caught the word "stumble" from his disembodied voice, he stumbled in obedience, forgetting to hold himself still for the sensation of stumbling. And what, anyway, warned of a stumble, was he to do. Sit passively for the experience to flow through him and pass? What he had recorded as advice seemed peremptory instruction, terse orders that his nerves responded to independent of his volition. The playback possessed an awful authority, as if the voice were no longer his, and the announced experiences

(which he had never felt) foreign to him. and at each random whim of the voice, distorted parodically from his own, his sensations would have inevitably to respond. And he the mere frame, the theatre for the puppet strings to be hung and tugged in.

He could never coordinate commentary and playback: the one perpetually blocked the other, as he tried to hear one thing and say another. And he would confuse them and having spoken a sensation into the microphone before him would immediately prepare to experience it, forgetting the delay that had to come His sensations became as random to him as before in that maze of playback and commentary and memory. And when he did accidentally, reflectively, re-enact the activity his playback warned him to prepare for, then he had to record another warning of that activity for his three hours later sensation: and it was as if he were to be trapped in a perpetual round to the same single repeated stumble.

He abandoned notebooks and tape-recorders. He sat at the window awaiting his sensations. Sex became a nightmare for him, its insensate action and empty voyeurism bringing only the cerebral excitement of a girlie magazine, its consequence a wet dream, the tension of waiting for which (sometimes with an urgent hope, sometimes with the resistant wished-against tension) would agonize him—keep him sleepless or, in the mornings, unable to read or move. And the continual anxiety affected his whole sexual activity, made him ejaculate too soon, or not at all; and he had to wait his three hours for his failures to reach him, knowing his failure, reminded of it cruelly three hours after his cerebral realization.

He could not sleep. Any activity three hours before sleep, would awaken him, bumping into a door, drinking wine, switching off a record player. The sensations would arouse his tense consciousness. He tried to control against this, spending the three hours before sleep in total stillness and peace, but the tension of this created its own

anxiety, produced psychosomatic pains: of which he would be unaware until they woke him.

He thought back with a sort of longing to his hospital bed, when without stimulation he had experienced only the slightest of sensations. But in those bare walls of the bare room, he might almost have been in a tomb. If life were only bearable without sensation, what was the life worth that he could bear?

Maria came back from town one day to find him dead in the white, still bathroom. He had cut his arteries in a bath in the Roman way, the hot water, now rich vermilioned, to reduce the pain of dying. Though, she told herself, he would not have felt anything anyway, he had no sensation.

But three hours afterwards, what might he have felt?

THE FITTEST
by George Turner

I never think of the future; it comes soon enough.
Emstein

1—Francis

One day in 2023, when I was six years old, and brother Teddy was nine, Dad and Mum took us to see the ocean. We had a car then (like most cars it was pretty old and Dad spent weekends tinkering with it because parts just weren't being made), and he ran us in a big curve round the Swill tenement area, never touching it, to the Bayside.

The ocean—actually Port Phillip Bay—was a disappointment. There was no beach of the kind they showed in the triv serials, only greeny-blue water stretching for miles. Instead of sand there was only sea coming right up to the embankment; but when we stood on top of the embankment we could see where an old road ran just under the water, with rows of houses on its far side, all broken down and half submerged.

When I said it was pretty silly to build houses in the water, Teddy gave one of his despairing sighs to show that I'd said something really stupid; but Dad explained that the houses had been built when the water was lower and had gone under as the sea rose. It had to do with the

greenhouse effect, which meant nothing to me then. Later I learned how the global temperature had risen a full degree Celsius in the previous forty years, that the Antarctic ice cap was melting and that the coasts not only of Australia but of the whole world were being slowly drowned. "One day," Dad said, "all Melbourne will vanish under sixty metres of water." We listened politely and did not take it in. 'One day' was forever away.

Only Mum said, "It must be terrible in the tenements," but we didn't take that in, either; talk of the tenements was not encouraged in Sweet society. Dad grimaced as if he'd rather she had said something else, but Mum went on, "It's said that at high tide the ground levels are flooded."

She sounded sorry for the Swill. In those days the sense of social division had not found its final expression.

I remember that I looked along the bay towards Elwood, where the concrete towers began, mile on mile of them reaching towards City Centre, and wondered how Mum knew about it because no Sweet *ever* went into the Swill areas. But adults always seemed to know things.

I imagined the tops of the towers peeking through sixty metres of water and millions of Swill swimming like mad. It was vague because I had never actually seen a Swill and probably never would. But Teddy asked, "Where will the Swill go when they're washed out?" He was only curious; he didn't really care.

Dad, who always had answers, didn't seem to have one for that. But why worry about Swill?

Having, presumably, extended our education by the sight of a lot of water (it was said people swam in it until it became too filthy for anti-pollutants to clear) we went home. Home was a four-roomed house -solid middle status—with three metres each of front garden and back yard, a few miles out from the Swill areas ringing City Centre. Dad was an engineering draughtsman, a designer of machine components on a computer screen. I think he was not a strong character, but his job meant we were Sweet.

Mum was the strong one. If I loved her less, mainly because of Teddy, I trusted her more; it was Mum we turned to for decisions and permissions and the drying of tears. She was the one who sang songs and filled the house with the colours of joy. She would charm Dad's moods by teaching him dance steps on the back porch until his two left feet scrambled together and brought them to a staggering clinch of laughter and love.

Teddy would turn his back on their happiness. He hated Mum's joy in anybody but himself; he would turn away as if something, somewhere else and less boring, had claimed his interest. My earliest memories centre on Teddy's jealousy Dad he could ignore; I was welcome to the Old Man.

Teddy was the golden boy, with Mum's dark good looks and, later, her dancer's body. And Dad's moodiness. He was three years older but we got along well enough, though there was not that much affection between us; we were used to each other, little more than that. When, rarely, we quarrelled he would sneer and circle his finger round his temple and call me 'Figure-farter!' and walk away, leaving me raging and obscurely contemptible.

It did not occur to me that his contempt for my useless little talent masked jealousy of my one superiority, or that his needling was an effort to trick me into explaining how lightning calculation is done.

I couldn't explain, then or now. How describe sound to the deaf? I can only say that figures have *form*, like shapes that are invisible but sensed—that if I set *this*-shaped form against *that*-shaped form, together they make a *product*-shaped form. My answers are always right; when you can *see* answers it is not possible to be wrong.

In a time when every adult wore a wrist cally and only quite old people remembered how to do sums with pen and paper, it seemed a pointless talent. This was driven home at school (I was still six) when, given my first training cally, I announced in class that I didn't need it, that I could 'do numbers faster than you can punch the

cally'. And proved my boast. For an hour of glory I was shown off to senior teachers who applauded the performance with tight smiles. (How could I realize that these invincible adults, wrapped in wisdom, could not match my display? Nobody, literally nobody, bothered with mental arithmetic.) Back in the classroom I was told, in a crash of falling vanity, that I would now learn the cally like everybody else.

At home Teddy, who had heard all about what he called 'my nightclub turn', rammed humiliation in my teeth with his superior, "Put you back in your box, didn't they!"

I rushed at him, half blind with tears and wholly blind with self pity, to be met by a condescending straight left which set me howling on my arse in the back yard.

Still, we were on the whole happy kids. Having no other era for comparison, we did not know that we had been born into what the Chinese curse calls 'interesting times'.

2025 was a pivotal year (I realized later), the year in which pressure of world opinion gave away a third of Australia's empty hectares to the ant-hordes of Asia, forced out of their paddy fields by swarming fecundity.

The Sweet, aware that their comfortable lives hung on knife-edges of global politics, dared not protest, though a few dispossessed landowners vanished abruptly into the Swill. The Swill, already ninety percent of the population, and knowing that things could only get far worse before they failed to get better, did not much care. Most of them had never seen countryside, let along the outback. All desert, wasn't it? So let the Veets and Chinkers and Indos have it. No place for a white man.

The yellow man, born of centuries of harsh subsistence, made the desert bloom (sparsely) by introducing a torrential rainfall program which disrupted planetary weather until international rumblings forced moderation; then he poured megatonnes of liquid fertiliser into the soil, and, in a few years, polluted not only the coastal water table but also the artesian reservoirs

underground. Water, already in controlled supply, became as scarce in Australia as in the rest of the world, expensive iceberg tows and desalination projects brought desperate governments closer to bankruptcy.

So there were a hundred million people living, after a fashion, on a country capable of supporting a third of them in reasonable manner.

2025 was also the year in which the global population topped the nine billion mark. An annual increase of one and three quarter percent doesn't sound alarming.

All this was meaningless: I was eight years old and living the good life.

They called it 'superannuation' because 'sacked' and 'fired' and 'dismissed' had assumed meanings too nearly terminal for the uneasy minds of the dismissers.

Dad came home early and silent and went to Mum in the kitchen and told us to go outside. We sneaked into the passage to listen, and learned something about the world.

Progress, magical progress, had squeezed him dry and squeezed him out as new techniques eliminated the human component in creative design; given a startpoint and a specification the new computers sorted millions of alternatives to spit out, in minutes, the optimum shape of the new model. An entire department was 'superannuated' that day.

Across the world thousands of men and women were tossed on to the job market every hour; and that was a buyer's market. No one *sought* a job; all-knowing Central Data matched person to vacancy, rare vacancy, with disinterested precision. In the shrinking market few fluked two jobs in a lifetime. Ninety percent of the workforce was on Suss, subsistence, the bare means of staying alive—in the Swill tenements. No government on Earth could have afforded more in the day of plummeting poverty; most could not afford as much.

We heard him say these things; and Mum, for once, was frighteningly silent. More terrible was the sound of tears in

his voice; we had not known that grownups could cry. Worse still, for me, was the expression on Teddy's face, an awful amplification of the derision with which he called me 'Figure-farter'.

We fled when Dad came stumbling out of the kitchen and slammed the bedroom door behind him, but Teddy had the nerve to go to Mum and ask, "What's wrong, Mum?" He got no answer. She continued preparing dinner with set face and set, unthinking motions. She may not have heard him.

When, in an hour, the meal was on the table, she went to call Dad

After a while we tip-toed to the door to see what they were doing. They weren't doing anything. Mum sat on the end of the bed, shuddering, and Dad lay dead in a great muddle of blood from his slashed throat.

Teddy crept to Mum's side and she put out a groping hand to him. He leaned over Dad, with that look on his face again, and screamed like a demon, "The rotten coward!"

For the only time in his life, I think, Mum hit him, a wild blow powered by her misery and lost love. He fell back, silent but furious, and his fury now was against her. I saw then what had always lurked somewhere in my mind, that Teddy's love for her had been his need for notice, that he loved only Teddy.

The house and car were sold at bedrock values. There were savings enough to stave off the tenements for a year or two, but we would have to move to cheaper accommodation. For any real life beyond the year or two we could only pray. The light and joy went out of Mum and it never came back.

Mum found us a place in Elwood, horribly close to the tenements. It was only the rented half of a house but with it we were not Swill. Not quite. Not yet.

We moved in the early dawn when few would see,

though neighbours had pointedly ceased to know us. Our new street was disheartening—crumbling old houses, shabby little gardens, broken footpaths without trees or flower tubs—and Teddy said, "It's a stinking slum."

It wasn't, but its time was running down; the tenement towers soared only two blocks further down and their march was inexorable. They were a sociological disaster but the State's only answer to workless poverty The ancient couple who owned the house hovered on the verandah, trying to look as though they were not inspecting our furniture and calculating the additional squeeze.

On the footpath a lanky, fleshless but tough-looking middle-aged man leaned against the fence, watching us and chewing. I wondered was he one of the 'chewers' never seen in respectable suburbs. He wore a knife openly at his belt, according to schoolkid legend this meant that he was a local gang leader. (Curiously half correct.) When he spat a gobbet of grey stuff I had my first sight of the 'opiate of the people', the mildly stimulant vice of the gutter, and felt the romantic excitement of wickedness.

I was fascinated by this figure out of the triv serials, but Teddy turned his back, registering contempt The chewer grinned some contempt of his own and narrowed one eye at me in a ferocious, entrancing, conspiratorial wink.

We had two tiny bedrooms, a small loungeroom and use of the kitchen and 'offices', and we had too much furniture; our living space would be suffocated with belongings. The chewer assessed the furniture with a sharp eye, while Mum tried to be unaware of him; and the old couple exchanged prunefaced remarks below our hearing, spitefully delighted at the fall of pride which brought us to their level.

When the last load was off the van, the chewer addressed the quiet air. "Morning, Missis Conway."

Mum looked down at my feet, knowing what was coming, not knowing how to deal with it and very nervous. She half whispered, "That is my name."

"Billy Kovacs. You'll get to know me PR."

With a sort of last ditch courage Mum said, "Public Relations!" in the voice she used for dirty habits.

"Protection Racket, Missis Conway. Call things by their names, then no mustakes " Mum motioned Teddy and me to go inside, but Kovacs said, "We'll all go in. What the kids learn could keep them alive a day longer."

Mum knew it would be worse than unwise to prevent him, but, to my happy ignorance, he was exhilarating. Life in the raw! I felt stirrings of hero worship for tough Billy Kovacs.

Teddy and I sat on the sofa and absorbed education; Kovacs perched on one of our crates and Mum simply stood, forlorn and fidgeting. Kovacs said, "You've got nice stuff. Should have sold it. People hear about nice stuff and start thinking how *they* can sell it—over your knifed guts."

Mum muttered, "It can't be that bad. You're trying to put your price up."

"It is that bad and your price was fixed before you came. We know how much you've got."

That shocked her, and so it should have. "How could you know? You can't tap computer accounts "

"Can, too." His grin was craftier than Teddy's worst, but more open. "The coppers help."

I squirmed with glee at this confirmation of the hints given in the triv thrillers. Mum had always said they were exaggerated, and now she was so badly upset that she could only mutter, "Corruption!"

"Co-operation. You paid taxes for police protection. Now that you're Swill on the Suss " Mum's anger rejected that, but I could tell that he had said it deliberately "—you don't pay taxes, so the police don't know you, unless you do something like join a protest march against food prices or power blackouts or kid prostitution. Then you get your brains splashed on the footpath. What you don't get is protection against theft or murder or pack rape."

'Pack rape' struck home. The schoolkid network had

tales of kids left bleeding and half dead on the street but no one had known if they were true. Mum muttered again that she didn't believe him, but she did believe; she was only talking up her courage.

Kovacs shrugged. "You better. The newscasts don't tell you; they aren't allowed. No use inflaming the public, is there? Besides, who cares what happens to Swill? They're a useless charge on the State; why trouble decent Sweets by flashing Swill sores in public?"

He didn't sound angry, only practical. Looking back, I see that Mum knew all this but was refusing to admit that it now embraced her and us. He went on, "Now you get my lecture for new faces. First day in Swill College."

The lecture was for us more than Mum. I came to know Billy well, just as he had said, and to love him, rat face, fast knife and all, because he cared.

"First thing: nine out of ten on Suss and getting worse, never better, because the State is broke, like nearly every other country. How to fix it? You don't know; it's too big so you don't think about it. Do you, now? Next thing: the State has to cut costs and coppers are expensive. So—skin the police force right to the bone. Not enough coppers now to go round the crims. You with me? The law protects property before people, so the coppers look after the haves—the Sweets—and to hell with the have-nots—the Swill. You begin to get it?

"Big thought coming now, Missis: a lot of Swill are half civilized as well as ignorant, dirty and hungry. They don't like living with theft, rape, murder and the half human louts of gutter life. So—a vigilante system. Us. PR. And PR have to take risks, including our lives. So we get paid. We don't skin you but we take something, and we look after you, 'specially the kids. We don't always win but we keep a sort of balance—and we don't mind killing some bastard that gets out of hand.

"The coppers couldn't care less. They stay out of the tenements; they'd get killed if they went there less than a dozen at a time, but sometimes we tip them off to a hit

when they're in need of a boost. And they do little things for PR—like computer information or turning a blind eye when we get a bit rough. They don't like us, we don't like them, but it's a system. It works about as good as you'd expect and it costs you five dollars a head, every Monday."

"Or else!" Mum said, trying to be savage but only putting on a front.

"Not at all, Missis. We just withdraw. And after a week you don't have a chair to sit on or a virgin son."

He watched our open mouths with a sad little smile on his rat face while Mum counted out five-dollar notes. He took the money and stood to go. "I'll look in sometimes and see how you're doing."

At the door he turned back. "You kids! If you get in any trouble you yell for Billy Kovacs. Nobody else, only me. I'm your Number Two Dad and don't you forget it." He grinned at Mum. "Yours, too, I suppose." She didn't like that much. He thought of something else. "You'd be Teddy—eleven, nearly twelve. Been tested yet?"

Teddy had decided to hate him, glared and would not answer Mum asked tiredly, "Do you know everything about us? He's had his Test."

I hadn't known. It was big news because only kids showing particular promise were Tested.

"No letter?"

"Not yet."

He said to Teddy without enthusiasm, "Good luck."

Teddy's arrogance rose up to put Kovacs down. "There's no luck in Testing. You're Extra or you're Swill!"

Kovacs grinned again. "That's dead right, son, but there's plenty of Extra heads with only Swill hearts."

When he had gone Mum shut herself in her bedroom, to face reality on her own. She had got old.

I can't guess what Mum's real thoughts were, but her need to be alone led to the single most frightful experience of my life. Despite warnings, I came close to catastrophe on that first day.

Teddy and I explored. The house was unlovely, the walls cracked, the floors uneven, the wiring dangerous. The kitchen reflected its owners, who seemed dirty, decrepit and indefinably wicked; in fact they were simply old and frightened of the life around them. There was a small back yard with a square of patchy lawn and some dusty geraniums. Teddy said, "Disgusting!" and brooded. There would be no company from him that morning.

I went and hung over the front fence. The street was wide and there were old, broken traffic-light standards on the corner, so it must have been busy once, but in half an hour only a single commercial hovertrain whoffled slowly past; the neglected road surface would have shaken a ground truck to pieces. There were few people; it was too early for shoppers and no one with work to go to would have lived there The city might have been dying instead of growing like a mad thing.

I went to the corner for a glimpse of the fascinatingly dreadful towers, only two blocks away, the triv story haunts of brutes and horrors. I could not go near—but I could go a little way. And so I did, driven by the unknown awful, a little way and a little way until I stood on the last street corner of safety and the concrete tower soared fifty yards off across the road.

At close hand it did not frighten. A few shabby but ordinary people went in and out on the ground floor; a few women moved on the balconies. It was huge but very disappointing.

I heard an unexpected, glad sound of kids at play, laughing and calling out and in a minute saw them. They came, a dozen of them, my own age but ragged and dirty, in a wedge down the middle of the road. One in the lead panted and cried. The pack squealed at his heels, one bigger boy with long legs closing in and reaching for him. It was not a game but a hunt. I stood ice-frozen before my first-in-a-lifetime spectacle of murder, scared witless.

The big boy lunged and the prey vanished in a struggle of kicking bodies. None of them had shoes but the

screaming was abominable. Then the biggest one jumped twice on the victim's belly and the screaming stopped.

I thought they would run away then, but they gathered, chattering and happy, on the footpath. Game over.

The big one saw me, a fresh toy on his horizon, and said—I heard him plainly—"A fu'n Sweet!"

My clothes, of course. I wore enough on my back to feed the pack of them for weeks. He called out, "Wotsher nyme, Sweetie?"

The Swill accent can't be written down; it is far worse than any triv actor's imitation, barely understandable.

My petrified throat could barely pass breath as they swarmed on to the road with hunting whoops. I expected to die. Then idiocy unfroze and I turned to run.

And ran straight into a hard body and a hand that held me prisoner while I screamed new terror, then turned me around to see the hunt halted in mid-street. The kids looked to their tall leader, but he had come to a stand. With a gesture that reduced him from fiend to snotty kid, he poked out his tongue. Then they all turned back, swaggering, pretending they were not defeated or afraid.

My rescuer snarled, "Stoopid li'l bassid! Wotsher doon 'ere? Yer got no sennis?"

That is the best I can make of his awful speech. He had his father's rat face and the bone-and-muscle body but not his hard kindness. He shook me, and it hurt. "Onna street in *'em* patches!" and more in his horrible Swill whine, telling me to wear overalls and go without shoes and go to home and stay there. I found later that he didn't always talk like that; 'local colour', he called it.

I was unable to speak for gratitude. Godlike, he had shown his face and the enemy had fled.

Then he brought his free hand from behind his back and slid his knife back into its belt sheath. PR or not, he had taken no chances with the smaller foe. That was a lesson—that grownups could be frightened by children.

Thumping me, not kindly, in the direction of home, he

swore his Dad would half-kill me when he reported how stupid I was.

That was Alan, Billy's youngest, murdered two years later, trying to break up a gang rape. He was nineteen.

At home I said not a word. Mum would have been distraught and Teddy would have humiliated me with superior good sense. I spent the day dreading Billy Kovacs and his vengeance. When he came that night I fled to the back yard, but instead of telling he came out after me, and instead of belting me he said softly, "You were lucky, eh?" And of course I blubbered. "Not just lucky, Francis. He was there because I told him to be. Because silly little boys are as bad as silly grownups, and have to learn. Stop bawling!"

I stopped. Billy had that effect when he wanted to.

"Don't go near the towers again. Not ever!"

"No, Mister Kovacs." Nor did I. My social education may have suffered but my skin remained whole.

Then he bent down to me, and his breath smelled of the sour-sweet chewgum. What he said was strange. "You may be special. Not Extra but—well, special. Your Mum says you figure faster than using a cally."

I muttered, "Yes, Mister Kovacs."

"Well, we'll see." He didn't explain what he'd see and I didn't ask. My whole, deep attention was fixed on the determination that I would *never* let myself fall to the life of the Swill. *Never.*

There were shops, away from the tenement area, and I walked a mile every morning to buy Mum's paper. She read about the world she no longer inhabited but was the only world in the news columns. No news happened in the Swill region which housed nine-tenths of the city swarm

Billy would explain: "One bashing's much like another and Swill murders are nasty, no class about 'em. Not to disturb Sweets with that stuff."

There was also a sheet printed on duplicators by people

who had, like us, fallen to the Swill edges and now spent their lives complaining about it. It printed things like ' . . . more than a hundred unreported murders committed every week . . . children starve because their food is stolen by stronger children—or by adults . . .'

Mum, knowing but resisting knowledge, would ask, "Is this true?" and Billy who became a sort of friend of the family but still collected his Monday dollars—would tell her that wasn't the half of it.

"But surely it can be stopped!"

Bill would say with a ferocious grin, "How?" and read her a lesson she refused to accept. "Too many people and not enough resources to give anybody a useful share, *anywhere* in the world. And the poorer they get, the more get born. That's an old fact but what can you do about it? Wipe out poverty? How? Easier to wipe out the people."

Mum ignored the monstrous coda. "Equal sharing—"

"Equal arseholes, lady! There isn't enough of anything to be equal with. It gets worse, not better."

"And when it can't get worse? When even Sweets—"

"Then the killing starts. Remember kangaroos, when the hunters used to shoot enough to keep the numbers down? The cull, they called it. Then it came there wasn't enough food for us and the kangaroos, so they cull them right out, just like one day we'll cull ourselves." His sharp eyes brooded. "Your boys may see it happen."

We didn't believe him. People much wiser than we paid little attention to future enormities. If you didn't look, they would go away. I didn't know that thoughtful people had been considering food, birth rate and poverty for half a century and finding only monstrous resolutions. So what? I still had enough to eat.

When Mum laid the unopened letter on the table Teddy was frightened to touch it at first. After a while he said, "I feel sick!", picked it up and went outside.

Mum asked me, "Do you know what being Extra means?"

"You go to a special school."

She said, in a tight voice like somebody reading a set piece, "Extra is a Latin word; it means *outside*. An Extra has abilities outside the ordinary. Better still is Ultra. That means beyond. The top two percent." Her tone was desolate. "Teddy could be Ultra."

Teddy had never seemed all that clever; smart-alecky, perhaps, if that counted But he kept so much to himself, there was no knowing . . . I asked, "Will it make him a Sweet again?" What other advantage mattered?

I thought she would say, "We are not Swill, Francis!" but she only said, "Yes, Sweet for ever," her voice weeping.

My angry envy protested, "He can't do sums "

Mum's laugh had a little shake in it. "Doing sums isn't very Extra. It's a talent, not a a superiority."

Teddy came back with no expression at all on his face and said, "I'm Ultra."

After that neither he nor Mum knew what to say, until she asked, "When do you go?"

"Next Monday." Teddy didn't often make jokes but for once he tried. "It'll save you five dollars a week."

Mum smiled as if that was a terrific thought (it would also lose her Teddy's share of the Suss) and she didn't think Billy would mind. Then more silence.

Teddy broke it. "I'm going to ask for Police Special Intelligence School."

Even my age and inexperience saw that a sort of super-cop in the family could be useful

He left on the Monday without fuss. Mum would have hugged him and been sentimental but Teddy seemed not to want that. A hoverbus floated over the wrecked macadam, carrying the intake of Extras and Ultras for the State Academies, and Mum said, "Come and see us as soon as you can, and tell us all about it."

"Of course," said Teddy, but his eyes were on the bus.

And that was all. He didn't come.

Mum started writing to him, and pretty soon an official letter came, cold as deep winter: ' . . . psychological gulf

between Frederick Conway's present training and his family circumstances . . . proper balance with new relationships . . . social tensions implicit in the consciousness of Sustenance connections . . . parental feeling must, in fairness to the boy, take second place . . .'

His absence didn't depress me; I made friends of a sort with a kid two doors down. But Mum took a long time to recover from that letter.

It took Billy Kovacs to point the lesson. "Now you see what Swill means. They draw a line. Be pleased you have at least one son in Sweet heaven."

Billy was often rough but always honest, though I doubted when I asked him what the State wanted with the Extras and Ultras. "The superbrats? Insurance. So they'll know who not to kill off. Heaven's an exclusive area."

It was the one thing he was one-eyed silly about.

Billy Kovacs (despite his name he was third generation Australian) babied us. We didn't question why he should give us such attention, such *loving* attention, though the reason appeared eventually. We were simply glad of it. So, when the question of school came up, Mum turned to Billy. Suss schools were unthinkable; they taught little, were ill-attended and at times spattered (Billy said) with the blood of pupils and teachers. Popular education for Swill had died almost unnoticed as State support dribbled down to less than essentials.

Billy did the unexpected with contacts which reached *through* the police to Sweet areas beyond them. (He said effective coppers had resources in Sweet as well as Swill, and criminal minds.) He found a school in the fringe area, a small private school catering for lower-income Sweets sure to be soon phased out of their status but hanging on as though tomorrow might not come.

On the first day he went with me. The headmistress, Miss Walters, was thin and grey with the beaten look that was affecting Sweet as well as Swill. Another woman, expensively dressed, sat by the window—middle-aged,

hard eyed, with a no-nonsense look. *Extra-Bitchy Sweet*, I thought, which was unfair; she was in fact a sympathetic woman who happened to run a business—not quite honestly. But at first I was wary.

In any case it was the man with her who seemed to run the meeting. He was plainly Very Big Sweet, safe, assured, and tough under his soft flesh. He grunted, "Looks like any other kid."

Billy, just inside the door, said, "That's part of his value," but the Sweet pretended he hadn't heard. Some Sweets had begun to believe that Swill weren't really there.

The Sweet woman, though, looked at Billy as though he was alive, even human. Miss Walters didn't seem to have any part in what went on.

Very Big Sweet said to me, "You do figures in your head, eh?" and didn't wait for an answer before he snapped out, "Seventeen into twelve-seventy-four!"

It was too easy; I had it before his mouth was properly closed. "Seven four point nine four one one seven six four seven oh five eight eight two three five two, all repeating after the decimal point."

He was rocked, but he grunted, "Write it down," and I did and he checked it on his wrist cally. Billy needled, "Try something that'll stretch him." The Sweet ignored him but set up a sum and gave me two twelve digit figures to multiply together. This was a breeze. He didn't know enough to set a hard sum.

The Sweet woman smiled and shook her head in mock amazement at the clever little boy, but her smile made me want to please her; smiles had been rare since Dad died Then she spoke —and the Very Big Sweet shut up *she* was boss. She gave me sums she had set up on her wrist cally, long sequences where small calculations came together to give one main answer. It was all easy but she had the answers ready and checked me all the way.

At the end she said, "It took me two days to work those on paper. You really are very good, Francis. Will you work

for me for an hour every week?"

I'd have promised anything for a word of praise, worked all night for a smile and a pat. I came to know her very well and she was never less than kind to me.

There was talk about terms and payment, as though Billy and I weren't present, until Miss Walters said, "I think you should negotiate with Mister Kovacs."

Very Big Sweet sniffed, but the woman glanced at Billy and asked me, "What is he to you?"

I told her, "He's my Number Two Dad," which made her eyebrows rise and her lips twitch. "He looks after me."

"Do you love him, Francis?"

"Of course."

She looked long and hard at Billy while Very Big Sweet said, "He's just a Swill crook," but when I put my hand in Billy's she asked, "Why not sit down, Mister Kovacs?"

Billy jerked his head at me, said "Piss off outside," and sat down.

Afterwards he wouldn't discuss the bargain, but it must have included a good cut for himself. When I asked, "What do I have to do?" he said only, "Be a schoolboy," but for once sounded as if he might be operating beyond his depth, so I guessed there was something not straight about it, which gave it an attractive edge.

He sat on my bed that night while Mum hovered around. "You've made a big hit with Missis Parkes, Francis."

"I only said I'd do sums for her."

Mum muttered, "I hope this –I wouldn't want him—"

"—and I wouldn't let it happen." What Billy said always went with Mum, even when she suspected it was not above board, which it often wasn't. They got close without my noticing for a long time.

I asked, "Why did she take two days to do her sums? She could have called them in ten minutes."

Billy gave me one of his lessons in worldly wickedness: "Because Finance Squad coppers can trace cally and comp operations, even recreate them after wipeout, and they

keep a big, nasty eye on business people who cheat on duties and excise and taxes. That makes it hard for Missis Parkes to keep two sets of books and not get caught. But if she has a cally that spouts answers without using a keyboard or a chip or whatever, she can write them down on a piece of paper. And who looks for records on paper any more? So only you and Missis Parkes will know what's in the second set of books kept on scraps of paper." He gave me a play punch on the jaw. "Understand?"

"No," I said, but as time went on I did. "Will I get a present or something?"

"Or something," Billy said, "and plenty of it."

After he had gone Mum whispered, "I'm sorry, Francis," and I answered, "I'm not." I didn't understand that old-fashioned Mum was worrying her heart out over having sold her son into a child labour racket. For an hour a week!

In time there were other customers. But Billy held me down to four hours a week, "Ranty value, Francis!"

I went with him to offices in City Centre, dressed in Sweet clothes to avoid notice, and I worked with people who called strings of figures, and wrote my answers on bits of paper. I came to learn the distinguishing signs of share transactions, tax dodges, international money buying and the rest—learned early, too, that not only my freedom but my life and Mum's and Billy's could depend on my keeping my mouth shut. Sweets can be merciless when they are frightened.

It paid. At home we had a better life, though only so far as the neighbours wouldn't notice. We couldn't risk showing wealth. But the thing that really mattered, which I hugged to myself, was that I was on my way up, away from the dangerous tenements. In time I would be properly Sweet again. There would be a way.

Change is something you adapt to quickly and then forget or ignore.

I was eleven when the State froze personal bank accounts, allowing only businesses to operate financial transactions. Many who had not quite fallen into the Swill now fell all the way and more than a few Sweets suicided rather than face social obliteration. The State—really, the world—was stalling. Pollution was rising with population. Natural resources were either vanishing or priced out of reach of most governments. Synthetic foods were constantly being withdrawn as undesirable (meaning 'dangerous') effects appeared.

Three years later the money system collapsed, world wide. Currency became obsolete and State Credit the only mode of finance—and credit was determined by your usefulness to the State. It meant that most Sweet continued to live bearable lives but the condition of the Swill became indescribable. There were two populations—Human and Other.

Mrs Parkes—the Ma'am like a lot of the Big Sweet, had not lost her business when money went, but moved sideways to being an arm of State Supply with herself as Manager, responsible for administration and accounts. Payoffs were made in goods instead of cash and what had become mostly tax-dodging and exchange fiddling became silent theft from the State; my double-figuring was done in quantities instead of currency.

So I was still able to provide for Mum and Billy, but Mum had to waste hours in distribution queues, getting little or nothing, just for the look of it. But community health declined; starvation, as distinct from mass malnutrition, appeared as the strong looted the weak. The Swill fought for Sweet scraps.

Conditions in some parts of the world were far worse, but still the populations climbed. In the corner of Australia, which, by then, was all that was left to us, we were fractionally better off than most. We didn't want to know about the others. So we didn't know.

Nobody imagined there would be a recovery. Some day there might be a miracle, but in our time there would only

be grim adaptation, survival of the fittest until fitness itself ran out. Word filtered down the rumour lines of Swill protest, violence, even rebellion, never achieving any thing. All States were police states, the means of mob control were totally efficient and Swill lives were worthless. Teddy had chosen his profession with prescience.

I was twelve when I noticed that Mum, who had never liked alcohol, was drinking regularly. Billy thought that she missed Dad and that Teddy never coming home again had broken her heart. I thought it was the misery of being stuck in a hole she could never leave.

I was fourteen when Billy moved in with us. With Mum, really. What happened about his Swill wife I don't know, but one day his grownup daughter came round and called Mum filthy names. Billy would have belted her but Mum stopped him, and in the finish the three of them sat round the table, arguing and getting drunk and sentimental.

I didn't drink then and don't now, and the sight of them getting themselves into the condition of animals made me feel sick—and in a way lonely, shut out.

Then there were the nights, the sounds of Billy and Mum in their bedroom. I was becoming aware of girls in the helpless way of one who had held himself aloof at school and made no real friends and now didn't know how to make them, and the sounds of love drove me to angry tears. I saw that Mum had made Swill of herself when she let Billy take her; the glamour was wearing off him, too.

When I was sixteen I knew it was time to get out or be caught forever with one foot in the Swill and one scrambling for a hold among the Sweet. It turned out not to be difficult.

My talent was in demand by the new brand of venal Public Manager, so I suggested to the Ma'am that I could handle more work, getting her a bigger rake off, if she put me on House Staff, to live in Quarters. She knew my horror of Swill life and she said with that smile that knew

the world too well, "You mean to consolidate your future, Francis."

I wouldn't have dared to contradict her. She asked, "And Mister Kovacs? Will you cut loose from him?"

Of course I would, must . . . Then I saw the meaning I had simply not thought of, the ingratitude, and could not answer. She saw, understood and decided. "That is your affair, but he has served me well in you; I shall arrange something for him. What used to be called a pension. He will not go short, or hungry."

I had to accept the rebuke, but it made it all the more necessary to cut the ties. I managed it without unpleasantness. At home I simply said that the Ma'am had decided she wanted me on the House Staff. Mum only nodded, as though at the inevitable. "It will be best for you," she said, accepting it, not complaining.

Billy came to my room as I packed, and spoke very quietly. "Don't be like your brother, Swill heart in Sweet clothes. You come back and see her. Often "

Of course I said I would; he'd have hit me otherwise.

I did go back a few times, but whenever I entered that shabby house I saw it for what it was, a Swill hole pretending to some class. And I saw Mum and Billy, clearly, as two people who could never be more than they were, Swill who had not qute gone under.

I stopped going back. I had to be all Sweet, not half Sweet. I had a future to safeguard. In a world where the fittest survived, I was a survivor and meant to stay that way.

Anyway, they don't need me. They have each other and alcohol to help them on down.

2—Mrs Parkes

(She sits in a corner of her lounge, hearing the drone of figures her Confidential Clerk is enunciating with careful clarity into the ears of young Francis—this work

is never done at Company office—and the swift summations of the voice now deepening into tenor. Her thought is on Francis, her mind strays about points of unease.)

I was interested in the boy . . . almost motherly . . . now I feel—what? Distrustful? I saw his terror of the Swill and understood it . . . the same terror which has blunted my own moral sense over the years. I saw his vanity and excused it in a child. I saw his selfishness and remembered that adolescence is the age of selfishness . . .

When he managed with crude artfulness to rid himself of Kovacs, mother and Swilldom, I smiled at the two faced comedy . . then I wondered at the coldness of it. Of the mother I know nothing, but Kovacs loved him in his complex, conniving fashion. I still pay Kovacs. I pay loyalty.

Amoral Billy taught the boy tough realities and has himself been discarded in the practical application of them . . . but of the realities of the larger world Francis' ignorance is confounding He is, for instance, only vaguely aware of the nuclear stand-off between the major powers and was not impressed when I told him, as a matter of historical wonderment, that it had lasted about eighty years—against all expectation He said, "That long?" and spoke of something else.

A natural response? His generation was born to insoluble international tensions, accepts them as normal, *never thinks* about them. A natural response to a *familiar* menace . . . *familiar* as breathing . . .

The population problem he sees only in terms of food. The scientists can feed them, can't they? When I explained that starvation is a *moral* problem, embalmed in frustrated distribution, poverty caused by expenditure on war and armaments, political interference and, on the final line of the account, by plain human greed, he said, "Wasn't it always like that?" *That's the way it is; what do you expect me to do about it?*

This is the world he was born into and he accepts it on

what he fancies are his own terms. My daughter, infinitely better educated, is no more interested than he. *It's you old people's fault; you made this world.*

I remember screaming that complaint at my father forty years ago. No wonder the only human direction is down.

And what do I do with all my knowledge of the deep realities? I rest content as a species of licensed thief.

. . if we deserve the world we have, does it deserve us? . . . must keep a wary eye on that young man . . . that *practical* young man . . .

3—Francis

At twenty I am happy in Staff Quarters. I have begun to accumulate tapes—music, drama, verse—and some modestly good prints for my walls, things I could not have dared to own in the Elwood half-house. I can think of Elwood without heartburn because I have learned the obvious: that every man and woman dies alone, that survival is an egocentric matter. He travels the furthest, as well as the fastest, who travels alone.

So I was shocked out of my mind last night when I entered my rooms to find a copper there, sitting, waiting. Not a blue-uniformed copper but a Special Branch man, in brown. He sat, and looked at me, not stirring.

For an endless instant I saw all my future crumbling in the certainty that the Ma'am had stolen once too often and been caught, that her little empire of chicanery and my small world of figures had ended. It was the worst moment of my life. Then the copper stabbed a finger at the books, the tapes, the prints, the carpeted floor and said, "You do yourself well, Francis."

I recognized the voice before the face. Teddy, at twenty-three, had hardened into dark timber. Nobody really knew what the Intelligence groups did but their reputation held neither mercy nor hope, and Teddy's face confirmed it; there were lines carved into the wood that should not

appear in youth, and behind his eyes an expression that did not belong in Sweet life. His face cried aloud that he had penetrated beyond the goal of his ambition, to the country of dehumanizing experience reserved for the Swill and the damned. Teddy had bitten off more than his stinking superior mind could chew. Still, I was afraid, and probably showed it.

He said, "Sit down, Francis. Relax. Stop sweating in your tiny heart; I'm not here to arrest you." The depth of his voice had changed; the tone of moody contempt had not. I sat. "We know why the Ma'am keeps you; we have always known." He leaned forward, genial over my fright. "Without our help she wouldn't last a day. But we all loot from the same barrel, so we need her, which means we need you. Or someone like you, because you aren't unique. So you live as well as an obedient mouse can expect of a furnished hole. For a while."

A threat? "What do you mean, 'a while'?"

"That all good things come to an end, the good things sooner than most, and the world is racing to the crash faster than we can keep pace with." He stared at me; he seemed puzzled. "Do you know what I'm talking about? Are you aware of the world outside? The real world of Swilldom, starvation, violence and terror?"

I couldn't see where he led, but answered, "I'm aware."

"After a fashion, Francis, but you haven't actually *seen*."

"No."

"And you don't care?"

"Must I?"

He became thoughtful. "No," he said, "probably not."

I felt more confident. "Look here," I told him, "I'm inside and the big storm is outside. What's gained if I count the lightnings and measure the wind velocity?"

"Or count the starving and measure the misery of billions?"

His voice came alive with anger, not at me but at the starvation and misery. But I had heard that conscience-quietening howl from other Sweet. "If I could wave a

wand," I said, "and change it all, I would, but what can one bleeding heart do against the inertia of a world?"

He smiled, and that was ugly. "Does your heart bleed? What did you ever do for anyone except Francis?"

"More than you," I said. "I keep Mum and Billy Kovacs in food and necessities."

"You don't; the Ma'am does." Under the circumstances that was unfair but nothing would be gained by bickering. "In any case," he continued, "it's time you went to see them. Four years is too long."

That was unexpected. Without even caring that he had been keeping tabs on me, I reacted absolutely, "No!"

"Not long to you, Francis? A long time to Mum."

That was too much. "*You* never went back! Twelve years ago you got on that bus and you never went back."

He was silent for a long time. When he spoke I was oddly reminded of Billy explaining bits of life to me. "I went back four years ago, when I found out that you had deserted her. I was ashamed. Can you understand that I learned to be ashamed? I was like you, hard and determined to hang on to the Sweet life, and I was never never never going down again. But Special Intelligence taught me shame. Would you guess that part of our training is to learn to dress and act and talk like Swill, to move among them and know them?"

I didn't know it and I didn't believe him. *No* copper goes into Swill areas except on armed raids.

"To learn their secrets, you think? They haven't any. We try to understand their wretchedness. We would help if we could. That is, many of us would—others are as hard as I was and you are. We want to know how to help if ever the chance comes, if ever things change."

"What chance?" I asked, "What change?"

He didn't answer because he couldn't, but he said, "Go and see Mum. She misses you. So does Billy."

I thought for a filthy instant of that shabby house in its shabby street with two ageing and shabby people inside, a woman who had taken to the bottle and a Swill rat who

worked a shabby racket among his own kind. In God's name, what would we find to say to each other?

"I could force you," Teddy said, "but what would be the good of that? You must *want* to go."

"I don't."

From behind him he produced what had been hidden between his body and the chair, the manuscript on which I had worked for a month, of which this is the final part. "I've been reading. Your thumbnail sketches of us aren't too acute. You didn't understand much of what we were; you still don't. And your self-portrait doesn't show the lying little animal who'd steal anything he thought he could get away with and then try to blubber his way out with fake repentance."

He threw the folder on the table, and my rage could find nothing better than, "That's private! Like a diary."

He shrugged. "I wondered why you wrote it; you're a bit young for autobiography. I think you have been trying to work something out, to find answers. To justify yourself for being what you have become."

I didn't trust myself to speak. He said, "Didn't succeed, did you? Truth kept getting in the way. So I thought there might be some love and pity left in you."

I took the folder and put it away in the drawer.

"Mum wants to see you. She keeps asking." I kept my back turned until I heard him move to the door. He said, "You're a survivor, Francis, aren't you?"

Yes, I am, and that's why I need to write no more about the past. That is the final, firm answer to his emotional questions: I am a survivor. The fittest.

4—Teddy

I might never have gone near the bastard again if Billy's message hadn't roused the spite in me, making one thing certain—that Francis would see the Swill tenements he had sworn he would never enter.

Dressed in Swill-mingling rig, I went in through the Beggar's Hatch to Staff Quarters, too angry to care whether I was seen or not. When he opened to my knock I pushed straight in before he had recognized the grimy gutter rat in torn trousers and bag shirt and plastic sandals cut from old cartons. I was telling him to shut up before I saw that he had company. And what company!

Eighteen-year-old Lottie Parkes, no less, smoothing her clothes from some rolling on the carpet in love and expectation. She didn't know me but she knew I wasn't Swill when I said, "I'll bet a week of A-Class eating that the Ma'am doesn't know you're here."

Anyone in disguise had to be dangerous, and she froze into silence. If I should indeed be Swill, so much the worse. Francis opened his mouth and I told him to shut it. Then to her, "Get out and don't come back and I won't tell your mother. Come back just once and I will."

She scuttled like a frightened mouse, not so much as looking at Francis, scared out of her little wits. Nor did he try to stop her. What a love match!

To him I said, "A dedicated survivor shouldn't play with fire. The Ma'am would have you killed."

Defiantly: "We'll be married!" Then, cautiously: "When the time comes."

He was unbelievable. "You really do want to climb the social ladder! Forget it. You're Staff Sweet; you might as well be Swill." He raged in black rigor as little Francis used to do. I told him, "Get a jacket; it's cool out."

"I'm not going out."

"You are. With me. To see Mum. She's dying."

It shook him but he said, "I don't believe you."

"You believe me and you'll come. Or do I tell the Ma'am you're fixing your future with her Lottie?"

I wouldn't, for the girl's sake, but he thought I would. He put on a jacket worth three months' food in Swill counting and I pushed him out of the room. He recoiled and I don't blame him; a disguise has to be foolproof, and I smelt of sweat, chewgum and drains.

At the hovercar he snorted at the one-way glass, "Big secret agent!" Well, we couldn't have it seen that it had a Swill driver. He didn't speak during the run from Balwyn Heights, not until we started down the hill towards the old house, when he saw the sheet of water at the bottom and said, "Hell!"

"Hell," I agreed, "with melting ice spilling twenty more centimetres of ocean each year round the shores. You don't notice it when you don't live here. Or visit."

The Sweet feel safe in Balwyn Heights these days but that won't always be high enough.

He asked at last, "What's wrong with Mum?"

"AIDS," I told him, sure he would never have heard of the old scourge. "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome."

I could have bet on his next line. "Is it catching?"

"I haven't caught it."

"Look here, Teddy—"

"You're going to see her. You can scamper to the clinic for checkup in the morning."

I hovered the car outside the house while he registered lightless windows, broken door, smashed fence and a metre of salt water lapping lazily round. He said, silly as ever, "They can't be there. Where have they gone?"

"Where *could* they go?"

When it sank in he came to life in sheer terror, yelling "I won't go there, I won't!" and trying to fight me. I hit him, not too hard, in the throat, and he collapsed and started crying. I was dealing with a nasty, frightened child who had avoided growing up.

I drove on past the tenement where he had his big fright thirteen years ago. He glanced out at the memory, then stared ahead; the tears, praise be, hadn't lasted. It was night and the moon on the tide-drowned street was brighter than the pale lights from the towers. The poor brutes can't afford power, even when the erratic power is available, and make do with stolen oil and improvised candles. The noise is an education; Swill mornings are quiet but at night the towers

are a bedlam of fighting, singing, screaming, laughter and sounds I wouldn't like to identify.

People at windows saw us and screamed, "Coppers!" because anyone unidentified means coppers. A few threw junk down, but these cars (it was a cop-car without ID) are built to withstand mob violence. Junk was no problem, but the gangs of kids navigating the streets on home-made rafts without lights or much manoeuvrability had to be watched for and avoided. There's enough death without my adding to it.

The Elwood towers were built forty years ago on concrete stilts that made shelters for ground cars. Tenement people with cars! I turned in under Billy's tower and jammed the sucker-cups to the wall outside the stairway door.

"Out, Francis!"

He shook his head. When I hit him again he understood. He had to jump down into three feet of water.

There was only faint light from the stairs, but in the darkness behind us a voice said, "Fu'n Sweet!" I called quietly, "No grabbins. 's mine."

"Ah! 's Teddy. Got a bit o' robbin for yoursel', Teddy boy?" A snide laugh. "Bent copper!"

"Nah. 's frens. Frenna mine, frenna Billy."

As my eyes adjusted I counted four of them, naked to the waist, knives in belts, on door picquet. I would have smelt them, too, if the stench from the doorway hadn't drowned their private odours -the stench of those who may get fresh water for half an hour a day.

"Up the stairs, Francis!"

He stumbled at the risers; there was only the light of a red-painted bulb run from a stolen battery. Around the first corner it was pitch dark, but I had a riot flare and it lit the corridor with harsh, white light. Francis gave a strangled howl, partly at the sewer smell, partly at sight of the corridor dwellers. Two-thirds of them were men, with a few women; the rest were kids, some of them brats thrown on the streets by desperate animal parents, many

there by their own rootless desire These are the dangerous Swill who maim and kill without need or urge, simply doing what is commonplace.

I stood still for those who woke to recognize me, and murmured to Francis. "There *are* coppers who can move amongst the Swill." He may not have heard me; by now he was properly frightened. So should anyone be of a hundred brutes, filthy, unshaven, many of them diseased, barely covered in rags, crouching against corridor walls in chalked spaces (respected or fought over), feral eyes glittering in the flare, nearer to beastliness than most animals ever get, because the animal without a niche simply dies but the human being who has lost his, lives to drop below the beasts.

Someone said with startled greed, "Get the Sweet!"

Again I warned, "No grabbins. 's Billy's."

"'s only Teddy. Piss orf, Teddy, an' le's sleep."

I pushed Francis ahead of me; he shuffled on with his handkerchief to his mouth, retching. A woman laughed like something breaking and mocked, "Sicky sick, Sweetie?" and snatched at his ankle as he passed; I had to grab and support him when he looked down into her one eyed, toothless, shrunken, wrecked face.

The next two floors weren't so bad. Billy was on the third, with thirteen Kovacses in a three-roomed flat—Billy and his two wives, his daughter and remaining son and their families—and at that they were better off than most. It was about as clean as you expect with kids and crowding and rationed water and the smell of toilets that worked only once or twice a day.

They got out of the bedroom when I pushed Francis in; they have their own idea of manners. Only the first wife looked at us as if we were something lower than herself.

I was aware at once as I said, "Hello, Dad," that Mum was dead on the mattress in the corner.

Billy said, "Too late, Son," and looked at Francis without speaking. He had been crying.

Francis glanced at Mum's body and away. Her face in its

last relaxation was still not bad-looking; just a trace discontented, and who will blame her? Then he looked from me to Billy with an expression between a sneer and a snarl, assessing the affection grown between us. He backed into the corner furthest from the mattress, taking in the sight and smell of death in poverty beyond endurance. Billy had two reflector lamps burning stolen oil and the pattern of shadows put devils into our faces, so that it sounded not at all wrong when Francis said, "I didn't want to come. I hate your guts, all of you."

Billy heard harsher brutalities than that a dozen times a day. He is nearly sixty and stringy as an alley cat but still the best man I know, the most generous hearted. He told Francis, "She never complained of you. Only said she had both sons in Sweet heaven and was proud." Then, not complaining, just pointing out: "You ratted on her."

Francis spat back at him like a mutinous ten-year-old, "If she didn't care, why should I?"

"I didn't say that. She cared."

Francis' eyes went back to the body. "It's done now. I'm not going to talk about it. Why am I here?"

With Mum dead there was no longer a reason. We had nothing left to say.

Francis found something. "I've remembered what AIDS is; I read it somewhere." The face he turned on Billy was wicked. "Venereal disease! You gave it to her. Lover!"

I'd have broken his neck; Billy treated him with gentleness. "Your reading's out of date. This is the new AIDS—infectious, contagious. Plague. Spread in sweat and spit and tears, maybe in the water. Maybe in the food the good State gives us. It's the cull, Francis, the cull you never believed in."

"I still don't." I fancy his teeth were gritted against chattering. "They couldn't do it."

"Our State? Then some other State. Why not? Get rid of the people and move in. More space and fewer mouths. It's the world's only chance, isn't it? Starving's too slow, so why not disease? Jumping genes, hard to counter."

Francis asked me, "Is it true?"

I didn't know; I still don't. I suspect it is true because it makes sense. And there's no use in saying nobody would do such a thing. Nations are desperate, so why not kill off a target population without destroying property, and then remake the vacuum 'closer to the heart's desire'? But whose heart? Intelligence has ideas but no facts and the hold of the disease is already shocking; it can't be a secret much longer.

Billy was saying, "We can't go on as we are, so why not a clean sweep?" He was not cynical, only sad.

Francis chattered, "Sweet don't have it. It's a disease of dirt. Like cholera, typhoid."

I said bluntly, "Sweet do have it We've got the Swill pretty well isolated, but it gets across."

Francis in horror was a sight to see, fearful for his Sweet life. "You're lying. I'd have heard."

"Even the victims haven't heard. They're cured, the Sweet, but not told of what. The Swill have found out, so it will get round the gossip line before long."

"Then there's a vaccine!" A vaccine for Francis Survivor.

"Not a vaccine, a cure—one gene-penetrating virus to fight another. And perhaps kill the patient if the immune system fails too soon. A hospital job—weeks. And no chance of handling it in plague proportions; not enough doctors or sterile wards."

I enjoyed saying it, watching his fright as he thought of what he might have touched . . . human sweat . . . in the hovercar, ME. His eyes roved from his hands to me.

I said, "It's no use running to the countryside; the farm guards will shoot on sight. Anyway, you're not fit for that kind of survival. You're dead, Francis. Most of us are dead Natural immunes will survive."

God help me if he didn't stir with hope. He could be a natural immune! He clutched at it visibly, making me wonder, *Is this what we've come to, that something like him could be the fittest?*

Billy said tranquilly, "It's the cull. What's it matter who's doing it? If they do it right, it'll be time for the new men. Not like us. They'll have different aims, different drives . . ."

I've heard it all before; he's been thinking it out for years, how the new man must learn to cope with the long life the doctors will give him, to discipline parental urges and keep the population down (that may be harder than anyone dreams), to learn ecology as naturally as speech, to find alternative sciences to conserve natural resources . . .

Nothing new there; back in the twentieth century, prophets without honour had been saying that we are on our way out simply because of what we are. Now we have the plague (and do the Plague Makers know how to stop, contain, destroy it?) and the hungry sea to remind us of mortality at tether's end.

Suddenly fed up, Billy said, "Take him away, Teddy. Take him home where he can plan to live for ever."

So I took him away and haven't seen him since. Perhaps he will marry Lottie after all; the fittest man can surely handle the Ma'am.

What hurts is that bleeding hearts count for nothing; we're far past the point of no return. And Ultra Teddy, safe in the cultural elite, can only run for comfort to an ageing larrikin in a slum.

At least his kind give each other support while the rest of us give birth to monsters, and I hope his kind will be here to build whatever world is to come. So that there will be love in it.

Or is Francis the New Man—the snatcher at advantage, the survivor, the truly fittest?

I suppose his kind can create a world, of sorts.

The punishment for all our sins of omission might be having to live in it.

APPLE

by John Baxter

The apple was red, smooth, coldly perfect. One patch, almost obscured by the shadow it cast in the soft light, was green, a blemish that served only to show up the flawless purity of the remaining colour. It lay on its side, letting light spill into the recesses of its hollow, from which the stalk jutted inconclusively, terminating in a small leaf, greenly transparent.

Low down, near the ground, a crater had been gouged out, exposing the white flesh. The hollow was an irregular one and already the air had turned most of the higher points to a rusty brown. Much of the rest was creamy with incipient decay.

A town lay just under this crater, half its three hundred houses in morning sunlight, the others obscured by the dark terminator of the apple's vast shadow.

To Billings, standing three miles away, it looked as if the apple itself were getting ready to snap up the rabble of houses over which it hovered, but when he looked up at the mass of the fruit looming solid and red in the strengthening light, its colour accentuated by the climbing sun, the sensation passed. It was as solid and immovable as the others. Faced finally with the thing he had travelled fifty miles to find, he dropped the long case of tools, hitched up his leather apron and reflectively massaged away some of the aches that had plagued him this last half day of hill climbing

The valley before him, Billings thought, looked like a mouth, the apple lying on a broad and smooth tongue of brown earth surrounded on three sides by a gap-toothed mountain range that grinned obscenely at him. His climb had brought him out of the throat, a narrow gully of dry earth rippled with erosion scars like a tumbled cloth. Standing now at the root of the tongue, he luxuriously scratched away a recalcitrant colony of itches on his neck, picked up once again the clanking bag of tools and moved reluctantly on.

Going down the slope was work almost as hard as his earlier climb. The ground was metal-hard, bleached by the rain to a sterile and jagged mass from which grains of mica and quartz glinted back the yellow sunlight. All atomic grounds had the same look; riven, like scraps of another world. No man, and especially not one of his trade, had to have one pointed out to him. The dead earth and the weird giant fruits it spawned were indication enough; just two of the jokes war had played on the human race. Like the Moths.

Head down, his eyes on the fissured ground, Billings tramped the long road to the town, thinking only of sitting down, loosening his tight apron and belt, discussing his fee with the town Boss. Mild pleasures, but the only one most Moth Killers knew. Staining the air he could smell the rotting juice of the apple, sweet and diseased, matching the bilious glow of the sun. He ignored the stink and soon it faded from his sensations.

He placed the Boss as soon as he saw him, then forgot his existence. He was young, ugly, tough—his town was the same. A ragged puddle of gimcrack shacks latticed with crooked muddy streets, its weak hold on reality was accentuated by the bulk of the apple looming above it, needing only a touch to roll down on it like a red moon, crushing the miners and their houses into the earth. But nobody cared. Women stood gossiping at their doors while children paddled around in the mudholes. There was an endless traffic of handcarts along the street carrying sawn

slabs of apple flesh to the presses or returning empty to pick up a fresh load. As the two men, Boss and Moth Killer, went by, the people bent their heads and said nothing.

Close to the mine, traffic was thicker and more hurried, the miners' movements more antlike than ever. The apple loomed over them, cutting off the light, and in the mire of mud and juice that surrounded the entrance to the mine, the men moved like naked spectres, shiny with the apple's blood.

A path had been made across the mud with slabs of pressed-out apple flesh, like porous brown wood. The Boss went first, Billings following. As they walked across the narrow track, men looked up at them, then stepped uncomplainingly off until they had passed. Billings watched the men's legs sinking to the knees in the brown bog but felt no sympathy for them. He had been used to such things when he was a miner. Now that he was more, it was his right to have privileges. He had worked for them.

The path's end was well inside the cavity It yawned like a vast and jagged pit above them. By the light of the oil lamps wedged into the walls, Billings could see the galleried mine rising three hundred feet above him, its face dotted with men. Their echoing voices peopled the dark air with ghostly curses and prayers, underscored and occasionally blotted out altogether by the trickling splash of juice from the cuts they made. An endless drizzle of the sticky sweet liquid fell to the floor of the mine, making their leather clothing glossy and stiff. Drops of the juice trickled off their aprons and fell into the swamp that surrounded them. The air was thick with the smell of decay.

Billings dropped his tool case, unlaced the opening and took out the contents item by item, laying them out in a neat row on the ground. His two blades, something like the billhooks used by the miners, were differently weighted so that the flat, almost square blade at the end of the four-foot handle could bite deeper and stay in longer,

its curved talon hanging on to flesh and carapace even when its wielder was unable to strike again. After this there were leather gauntlets and greaves, barbed pitons, a fat coil of rope and spiked boots. It had been some months since Billings had used the boots and greaves, but they had stayed supple inside the bag. He pulled them on, laced them carefully and picked up the rest of the equipment.

"The entrance is up top," the Boss said.

Billings looked up. There was less activity in the darkness, and he knew why. Word had spread that he was a Killer. He could feel them watching him, hoping –as he had hoped when he was a miner—to see some slip, a fault in his skill. He visualised how it must look to the men hanging in their harness up against the top faces in the dark, their bodies tacky with juice, hands welded to their knives by a congealing glaze of the stuff. In their eyes, used to darkness and yellow light, he would seem a dim and distorted figure, hardly more than an upturned face against the brown of the muddy floor.

He moved quickly and without warning the Boss, so that the man jumped visibly when Billings took his knife from his quiver and, with one neat wrist movement, sliced a horizontal gash in the main face. The flesh was brown, rotten, almost dried out, but another cut showed white. He cut again, severing the overhang so that the firm foothold was exposed from above and shelved beneath by the larger mass of rotted flesh. His right leg came up and the foot wedged deep into the notch while his arm swung again higher up, cutting a further foothold. His gauntleted left hand grabbed at the rough and crumbling surface of the main face, steadying his body for the movements of his blade.

The climb was dangerous, depending on a continued ascent for safety. His hand would steady him for only a few seconds before the rotten flesh collapsed under his touch, and the cleated soles of his boots would hold in a cut for only a moment before sliding out. There was no time for him to see where he was going nor concern

himself with the face above him. He had estimated where the ledge was that he must arrive at, and also the best route to approach it. Now he had to depend on his inborn skill. Spidering upwards, his hands grasped, his blade swung, his feet bit and pistoned him up the cliff. His mind was blank until, after a long moment of doubt, his blade cut air, his fingers grabbed a firm new-sliced edge, and he hauled himself up on to the main upper terrace. As he stood panting on the edge, he heard the miners around and above him muttering, sensed their admiration and was content.

The Boss took another minute to reach the terrace along the roped gallery that zigzagged up the main face. Billings waited without comment, cleaning his blade and scraping the accumulated pulp from between the spikes of his boots. When the Boss arrived he recognised resentment in the man's stiff face but said nothing.

"Further up," the Boss said shortly.

They moved along the terrace until it petered out in a dark hollow so small that they had to stoop. A miner brought down a lamp and the Boss took it, holding the light up. In the glow Billings saw the beginning of a tunnel, the ragged edges of transparent, slightly green material that lined it, and smelled the dry and musty scent he had expected.

"It's an old one," he said "Three days maybe "

He pulled at the tattered edge of the tunnel lining and shredded a piece of it in his fingers.

"Maybe four. It's dried out a lot."

"How far in will . . .?"

"I wouldn't know."

The Boss held the lamp further towards the tunnel, letting fingers of light probe the darkness There was nothing to be seen but the smooth sided circular hole plunging into the heart.

"How long will it take?"

Billings hefted his knives on to his back and took the lamp.

"As long as it takes," he said shortly and walked down into the darkness.

The Boss looked after him for a moment, then turned to stare at the silent miners hanging in their harness across the face of the crater. Their burning eyes were brighter than the lamps by which they worked. He moved quickly down the gallery without saying anything.

Inside the tunnel it was warm and dark. Billings trimmed the lamp and moved slowly forward, listening. Air moved softly around him, light glinted on the walls.

He remembered his father who had died in a tunnel very like this.

The town where he was born was an apple town. The fruit was an ancient wrinkled mountain still anchored to the earth by a thin bough tufted with leaves, though the bough was long since empty of sap and the leaves were parasols that rustled like sails in the stirring winds of autumn. But the flesh inside was still firm and men were not afraid to cut long galleries through the desiccated exterior where the flesh was juiceless (cells like dust-filled rooms repeated in endless transparency) to reach the sweet white heart.

They had found his father in one of those galleries, a long excavation that intersected the tunnel of a Moth. The body was wadded up into the gallery's end, a boneless mass of flesh frosted with the drying web-stuff of the insect's cocoon. . . .

Billings blinked back the image and drew a deep breath. The tunnel was empty around him, and for a few dozen yards in each direction he could see it stretching emptily into the shadows. Lifting the lamp he looked at the walls and saw his face reflected back from the depths of the transparent lining, a long gaunt impassive face that might have been his or his father's, or that of a ghost haunting the vast mountain of the apple, the spirit of a man lost in the empty halls of the centre, as Billings was lost—as they were all lost.

The deeper he penetrated the less he was afraid. The worst fear was of failing, but when there were no other men around him this fear disappeared. It belonged to ordinary people. The men who hunted Moths were different. They had an understanding with the universe, a heightened sensitivity to the world off which other men merely scavenged. The thick white massy bulk of the apple was a place with its own rules in which Billings was comfortable, at home. He recognised the risks, but they were risks of the apple and of nature, not of men. He faced death, but it was nature's death, not man's.

Thick and white the apple bulked around him. Billings could hear it in motion on all sides. Tides surged through its oceanic cells, membranes quivered with a motion as palpable as that of a heart. Above, below, on all sides, he sensed the white flesh sleeping in darkness, perfect, sweet, waiting. He moved in the apple like a god, feeling other gods, his father and his father's father, waiting in the shadows for him, resting just beyond the green tunnel wall. Layers of civilisation began to slough from him like shed skins and, half dreaming, he listened for the expected voice.

His foot slipped momentarily before the cleats caught again and he realised the tunnel was shelving slightly. At the same time his nose caught a different scent, an edge in the mustiness of the gallery, a suggestion of putrefaction. He unslung his knife. The tunnel was reaching its end, dipping down to intersect the vulnerable heart. His feet slipped more often and he had to cut steps in the floor to hold him from sliding forwards. The lamp showed him no ending to the tunnel but an area ahead of him that he could not penetrate with light. Slicing fresh footholds every few feet he slithered forwards The tunnel ended and he looked down into a deep chamber whose walls, glossy and transparent, reflecting his own elongated image, tapered some twenty feet below him to a point in which the globular brown shape of a seed was wedged He had reached the centre.

From now on the real business of his task began. Sitting on the lip of the tunnel, his legs dangling over the edge, he methodically checked his equipment. Then he looked down. The walls were mirror smooth and he could tell from their sheen that they remained slippery even though the seed chamber had been pierced. Wedging a piton into the tunnel wall he threaded his rope through its eye, tossed the rest of the roll out into space and climbed down.

There was no movement or sound, so he could assume his presence was still undiscovered. And when, behind the seed, he found the unguarded doorway to the inner chamber, he knew he could have surprise on his side. Pausing only for a glance back to make sure his rope remained fastened to the tunnel entrance, he dropped quickly into the main seed space.

Seeds hung like tightly cocooned beetles above him, their smooth backs turned out, their unseen claws clutching the central axis of the apple that gave Billings his only indication of the direction in which he was moving. It lay ten degrees off the horizontal, making the main seed chamber slope slightly upwards. The floor was slippery and being forced to fight uphill was some disadvantage but he depended a great deal on surprise. If he could catch the Moth sleeping or perhaps somnolent, beginning a cocoon it was their breeding time now and most of them were sleepy and slow—then his job would be easy. He moved forward, keeping the brown kernels on his right, watching the part of the chamber he could see under the rows of seeds for any movement. Each step made an infinitesimal but noticeable sound, a slight creak, as if walked on transparent leather.

The chamber was quiet, as silent as if it were the centre of the earth. Billings reached the upper end of the space, unslung his knife, and half turned.

A face looked back at him from the chamber.

In the far wall a spot of opacity had appeared in the transparency. The skin was unbroken but a window had

been cleared as a new tunnel reached the central core It widened quickly A low held head butted the membrane, lifted to bite through it—and looked at him. He glimpsed for a terrible moment the waving furred antennae, the brow, eyes and mouth of a fearsome face; wide eyes, sharp cornered; high cheek bones, a wide and scarlet mouth. Female, young . . . a talon split the skin and from the tunnel, newborn, the magnificent insect erupted into the silent space.

Backed against the wall, Billings watched the Moth, waiting for its move. The insect was patient, perhaps tired. She stayed near the new tunnel, licking globules of juice from her fur, watching him, preening.

Her body was that of a young Moth, about the size of a human girl, though slimmer than most. Only in the smoothly swelling breasts was there a specific reference to humankind. The down that covered her body in a honey-coloured mist shadowed but did not hide the smooth play of muscle under the flexible skin of the legs and torso, but around the head and shoulders a quick shading off of the fur and the appearance of tight shell across the skull and neck betrayed her insect nature. On first glance there were few other signs, but then she stretched back her arms in a quick gesture and the magnificent beige wings expanded from between her arms and body, their patterns of brown and black scrawling like hieroglyphs across his vision.

Billings blinked. In that moment clawed feet gripped the chamber wall, wings twitched an instant, and she sprang.

A right-hand cut to stop her advance, then Billings scrambled for the seeds hanging like a garland of gunshot down the chamber's centre. Air buffeted him as her wings gripped, but he was safe, sheltered from the slash of her claws for an instant, allowing him the luxury of a turn and new grip on his blade. Then she was under the seeds and rising to attack him.

Cut. The pointed tip caught a clawed forearm, bit, then

slipped. The shrill twittering of her voice filled the air. Then her other arm lashed out and he felt a blaze of agony in his side.

Cut again, hack down on the arm buried in him. Blood—green blood. Another lateral slice and wing membrane parted. Another. But she was still coming, her wings, delicate but not vital, taking the blows while her body remained shielded behind them.

Spinning down the chamber from her blow, Billings sensed the hollowness of the wall behind him. He looked down through the membrane into emptiness; a suggestion of mist but nothing else. A further chamber hollowed out beside the others, probably her living place.

Before he had raised his knife she was on his back but he swung down with one last desperate movement and felt the rotted chamber wall rip like paper. They fell down into a warm, steamy space that smelled rotten and corrupt. Billings twisted as he fell and sensed the disappearance of her weight from his back. Then he landed with a sickening suddenness on something soft and thick. He grabbed at it, slithered, hung on.

He was on a ledge of crumbling flesh high in her living chamber. Dimly he took in the rest of the place, the walls that descended in rotting terraces to the floor, the trickling juice that welled out of them in a dozen places, the flaccid sac of her discarded cocoon on which he had landed. From his ledge it fell twenty feet to the floor to lie among the stalagmites of brown flesh in valances of dusty green.

The escaping juice dribbled down to the bottom of the space where a pool of it almost covered a seed brought from one of the other chambers. The juice had partly fermented, and the place was hot, steamy, thick with the smell of decaying matter spiced by the tang of alcohol. Billings felt dizzy and sick. His side was beginning to hurt and he felt blood on his hands.

She lay by the pool, twenty feet below him, her wings sprawled across the juice-wet surface of the poolside, their delicate transparency glued to the smooth tacky

surface. She was struggling to rise, her hands fluttering across the floor in front of her.

The room was misty and Billings was wounded. He made a mistake. Unslinging his second knife -the first was lost in the main chamber—he grabbed a handful of the soft cocoon and slid over the edge.

The moment he did so he sensed his error. The cocoon was rotten, eaten to shreds by the humud air. Under his weight it ripped like decayed cloth. He fell, tumbled, scrambled down, enveloped in its clinging folds. His grasping hands tore at the stuff, bringing down fresh curtains of it around him. Then he landed with an impact that emptied his lungs. His knife skidded across the floor.

Billings turned his head to look at the Moth, then bowed to it like a sacrifice. Her body, no longer glued to the ground, surged up triumphantly, her magnificent face looked down at him, her talons raised in an embrace. He saw the descending claw, cried out, and was silent forever.

They never found his body as they had found that of his father but it was there for them to find if they had cared to look. Deep in the apple he lay cocooned in her web, his face looking out at her dried carapace. Long dead in the cold currents of autumn that, even deep in the core, she had felt and responded to, she left behind a final sign for him to ponder. Deep in his body, the larvae lay that would one day rise to be another Moth, inhabit another apple, just as she had risen from a Moth Killer's body herself, and others would rise after her.

Though dead, Billings sensed the last great possession of his life and was content. Staring into the silent chambers of his tomb, he waited for resurrection.

MY LADY TONGUE

by Lucy Sussex

Honeycomb, my honey, sweet Honey Coombe. I love her so much I daubed her name on the biggest white wall in the ghetto and round it a six-foot heart. The paint was shocking pink, and it dribbled, when I so wanted my ideogram to be perfect! She passed by that wall every day, but unfortunately so did others, and that was how the trouble started.

"Vandalism!" That was the Neighbourhood Watch, our ghetto guards. I was minding my own business, thinking of Honey, but cat curious I followed the groups of womyn drifting towards the clamour. It was only when I was in the main square that I realised the offence was mine. Ah well, I'd brazen it out—I'm nothing if not brazen.

There was a crowd in the square, which included the off-duty Watch and most of the powers-that-be in Womyn Only. One of the most dignified of these Elders was actually atop a stepladder inspecting my splash.

"Honeycomb," she announced to the groundlings as if every womyn of them couldn't already read. "Possibly male reference to our genitals?"

"Ishtar!" cried the Watch Chief. "They got in this far?" There was a horrified mumble from the masses.

"Tsk tsk. Sleeping on the job," I said, just loudly enough for the Watch to hear and not pinpoint me. Zoska, who'd reared me, came forward trailing her youngest.

"Not quite down to their usual standard, is it?" she said. "Bar the colour."

It was strident, but that's my style.

"They go in for dribbling cocks usually, not dribbling hearts."

Some of the hearers drew in their breaths hard, and she snapped: "Don't be silly, this isn't the Hive."

"You thunk it's a Sister?" asked the Watch Chief, catching on at last.

Zoska nodded her coif of plaits and I cursed silently: if she got much warmer things would be hot for me.

"Our vandal," said Zoska, "loves Honeycomb."

"There aren't any Sisters of that name," said the Ladder-climber. "Unless you mean Marthe's daughter Honey . . ."

Their heads followed one direction and I thought I saw my sweeting, so I waved my floppy hat at her. But it was only her grim mamma and I knew I was for it.

"I own up! I did it, I did it!" I shouted, jumping up and down.

"Thought so," said Zoska.

Marthe was looking black and I was beginning to realise why.

"Sister Raffy," said the Chief, "Womyn Only supports artistic expression but isn't this over the top?"

"Shucks Officer, I'm in love."

"Honeycomb," said Marthe as though that sweet name was wormwood in her mouth. "Is that your name for her?"

I nodded, thinking oh oh! My darling's name was Honey Marthe, the mother's name affixed to the daughter's, as is ghetto custom. Me, I'm Raphael Grania, but I only answer to Raffy. Coombe had been Honey's father, a sperm donor anonymous except in the genetic profile of his daughter. Hardcore dykes like Marthe (who never ventured from the ghetto nor indeed much from the Hive, our inner sanctum) detested the profiles—but kept them in case of genetic disorders. Honey had found the document, and discovered her humourless mother had made an accidental pun. I had laughed at that, at Marthe, but now I had made

a laughing stock of her, and worse. It was bad taste to remind Womyn Only that its girl children were not spontaneously generated.

Me and my big paintbrush. There was a long, really nasty silence during which I mentally gave myself a hundred lashes, and crossed miles of paving on my kneebones.

"You'll never call her that again," said Marthe and strode off followed by a curious knot of Elders. The crowd was staring and Zoska had piggybacked her child and was pushing towards me. I didn't need comfort now, just action! So I pretended not to see her and nipped around the corner and over a couple of back gardens, shortcutting to Honey's home. It was empty; and I stood outside and thought of the hydroponic flowers I had thrown through her window. Then I embarked on a long and increasingly desperate tour of our trysting places. I found nobody waiting, alas! and at the last the Watch Chief found me. She was embarrassed but stern.

"Marthe and Honey are in the Hive, from which the Elders have banned you until further notice."

I lay down by *our* fountain and imitated it for a while. Then I recovered and went to see Zoska.

"Ninny," she said.

We sat in the sunny brick courtyard behind her little house, she at her embroidery frame and Basienka, who had accompanied her to the meeting, wandering around the confined space in her enigmatic two-year-old's way.

"Oh, I agree absolutely. Now what do I do?"

"Go to Bozena at Haven, until the fuss dies down."

Haven was the refuge we dykes were building in the country. I had scouted the site and normally would go there gladly.

"Can't leave Honey." Puck puck puck went the needle into the stiff linen cloth. "I get soppy just thinking about her."

"Creamy you mean," said Zoska. "I know you."

"No, this is the real thing. I'm so sentimental I could die."

Zoska sighed.

"You're old enough to be her mother."

"Not quite. Honey may be sixteen, but I—as you ought to remember—had a late menarche."

She did the sums with her lips.

"So you did. I was confusing you with Boz."

"Quite a party we had for it," I said, hopping over a wall in my mind into memory lane.

"Was it ever! You tore up the poem Grania had written for the occasion and when she created lit out with Boz. The pair of you didn't come back until six the next morning, when you burst into my bedroom shouting you were in love with each other. I haven't had intoxicants at a menarche party since. Won't have it at hers either."

She grinned at Basienka.

"Look at her. Aren't I clever? Forty-eight years and three months I was when I bore her Broke the ghetto record."

I recollected that Zoska had begun the career of mothering with Bozena and had had thirty-two years at it since. Some daughters were hers; others came from Sisters who like Grania preferred not to have the rearing of their young.

She looked at me, reading my face.

"You and Boz may have had your adventures with Haven, but I've reared seven fine womyn Mind you, it's early days with Basienka and with Urszula I'm not sure."

I stirred, perceiving how my least favourite sister might help my purpose.

"You could use Urszula as an example to Marthe. She's not much older than Honey, she's taken up with Bea, who's my age . . ."

"I've got enough chickens to take chances with them. Marthe's only got one."

"Let me finish. And Urszula's leaving the ghetto!"

"Oh Ishtar, don't even think of saying that to Marthe!"

"Why not? Honey wants to."

"After she's been reared hardcore? To go among *men*?

Raffy, she really must love you."

"I want to swear committal."

She reached into the basket between us for a new skein of wool, the colours jewel bright against her fingers.

"Wow, Raffy settling down at last. Okay, I'll talk to Marthe."

She snipped off a length of wool viciously.

"It won't be easy."

Her gaze was like a mirror, in which my scarecrow image—in old camouflage duds from Haven (worn to annoy the hardcores, who never went Outside), lurid pink shirt, embroidered scarf and old hat—was reflected with censure.

"Raffy, you're disreputable. You'll have to smarten up if I'm to get anywhere with Marthe and while I'm at it also stop teasing the Elders and getting into fights with the Watch. You're the last match Marthe wants for Honey."

"I'm the daughter of a famous poet."

"Yes, and Grania denounces you in verse for being undutiful."

"We never ever got on."

"So I got the rearing of you, half my luck. Raffy, I can't win Marthe without Grania's help. You'll have to make up with her."

"I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes!"

"What's that? What do you mean?"

"It's poetry. Shakespeare, a man. I mean, I'll do it."

She was looking puzzled and I got up to stretch my skinny legs in the courtyard, puzzled myself. I keep my Shakespeare well hid in Womyn Only, because of what it means to me: lost time with Benedict, a man. Swashbuckling Raffy might have had a child, a son even, and not by donor but by the old way, which Shakespeare writes about a lot.

There was no telling what a hardcore dyke would do if she knew her daughter was marrying tainted flesh. But Marthe would never hear of it, would she?

In my perambulations I nearly tripped over Basienka,

who looked up from trying to unpick a wool flower on the skirt of the little peasant dress all Zoska's daughters, even tatty Raffy, wore. On her face was the same knowing smile as the Cumaean Sibyl, whose painting adorns a wall in the Hive, and I was suddenly afraid. Marthe could discover Raffy's little secret, from Grania, who might tell her if we two were unreconciled.

I looked away from Basienka, to Zoska.

"Can you talk to Marthe? I'll do Grania."

She nodded her silver-brown head, and I took leave of her. Grania lived outside Womyn Only, in a small brick house with a studied bohemian air. There was a hammock on the front verandah with a huge hole in it; the garden was a careful mixture of weeds and colour-clashing flowers; the brass nameplate said "Poet's Corner" Before I could knock the door was opened by Bea, lover of my foster-sister Urszula. She carried a carton of books for her shop, my mother's literary children, new branded with her squiggly signature.

"Hi Raffy, surprise to see you . . ."

"Here?" I asked dangerously.

She looked embarrassed.

"I'll get out of your way Raffy . . . do you really want Marthe for a mum-in-law?"

"Anything for Honey."

She walked down the pathway with my brothers and sisters. I waved, then went noisily inside. Grania was in her visitor's chair, a monster of carved mahogany chosen to diminish the bulk of the womyn within it. From my mother I had my height, but I blessed her donor for a lithe figure, for his genes dominated over those which would have made me resemble a hippo. She batted not an eyelid as I sauntered in.

"Come to your mummikins, lambie-pie," she said icily. It was the standard greeting and as usual I kept my distance, leaning against a wall of this book-lined grotto, with its troll queen enthroned.

"What, no fond greeting?"

Go cautiously, I thought.

"Did you ask Bea about me?"

"Of course. She said you were in trouble, big trouble if you come and visit me. There was mention of a sweet young thing locked away from your wickedness. Then she spied your approach and bolted, leaving me in a state of gossipus interruptus."

"I shall bring you to climax."

"This sounds like the tale of your lost month. The one time you confided in me."

I stared at her.

"Mother, we are of one mind. I want you to recall the incident."

She grinned evilly.

"How could I forget Raphael's *True Confessions*?"

My lost time had been thirteen years back, before Haven even, but it was vivid to me. When I dipped into the past with Zoska I had half seen the brickwork and moss beneath my feet strewn with coloured streamers and crushed paper cups. Now, instead of books I could see pollution-bleached grass, weird trees and eroded hills with knob rocks sticking out. She's very visual, Honey's Raffy.

I had seen Outside both ghetto and City, sussing out a site for Haven in the countryside. When I remember, the mind's eye comes through first, then later the body with what my past self was feeling. I had been happy, despite the desolation, which was coldly beautiful, and the dangers. The country had unmarked pollution dumps, which had already claimed one scout, wild dogs, and of course the bogey of man.

Ah, who cared! I was wearing camouflage clothes that were weatherproof; I had survival rations, weapons, mini-communicator, compass, heat detector, Auntie Cobley and all. The paraphernalia fitted neatly into a five kilo pack on my shoulders that left me unencumbered, feeling free. There was a wild wind blowing, early spring sunlight

and Raffy who had lived behind walls was madly in love with wide open spaces.

This was my first solo voyage. Previously I had gone with senior members of the Watch, who were supposed to restrain young hotheads like Boz and me, and then with Boz. That trip had been a mistake, for in the excitement we had revived our first love, only to quarrel so bitterly we resolved: never again. We were too alike, and I crave opposites, Honey.

I was walking through a narrow valley peaceful even though bisected by a service road, when I heard a droning roar, steadily increasing in volume. Diving into the nearest cover, a ditch curtained with green weed, I checked the heat sensor, which registered zero. My fears of a behemoth mutant vanished and I peered through the green to see a robotruck on the road, making its slow thunder from a macrofarm somewhere False alarm; but nonetheless I left the road and went cross-country, moving swiftly until I came to a patch of burnt-out ground.

I started to weep then, and my future self, standing in Grania's study, sought for a reason. There was a memory within the memory and it was red, the colour of the fire that had engulfed a house on the edge of the ghetto. Five womyn had been inside and there were more dead, Watch members who had surprised the arsonists. "Men did it," Zoska had explained to little Urszula, who had only stared at her uncomprehendingly.

After the fire had been doused there had been more red, with a torchlit meeting in the main square I was later to defile with my "honeycomb". The Elders had argued and argued what to do and slowly a consensus was reached. We were easily attacked within our enclosure, we needed to go beyond the city, found a city of our own. And so the Haven movement began, and changed the lives of Boz and me. We had been feckless ghetto girls, too wild for the Watch and too hardcore to find work in the straight world. Now we had a goal in life.

Standing amongst charcoal and singed trees, I wept for

the dead, until it occurred to me that were it not for them I would still be cooped up in Zoska's living room. There was a site for me to look at; I went on.

Our Haven was defined by a list of desiderata, a majority of which had to be ticked before the Elders would approve the site. My destination had already accrued some ticks, if we were to believe the intermediary feminists who had investigated the site in the guise of a macrofarm consortium. They had liked it. Yet the site needed to be seen with a dyke's eyes, and secretly. The memory of the incinerated house still burnt.

I spent a day at the prospective site, being thorough. Womyn Only looked at many locations, finding some too marshy, too polluted, too grim et cetera. I was writing the report in my head as I trudged: "Eminently suitable for our *queendom*, our *newfoundland*" –words Grania had used when she heard of my vocation, laughing all the while – "except . . ." It was insufficiently secluded, being too close to the farm I had seen the truck trundling towards earlier. And this farm, as the intermediaries had discovered, was not staffed entirely by robots.

I inked in the last mental full stop of my report and turned to go, when the late afternoon light caught a spot of colour on a distant hillside. When I pulled out my viewfinder I saw a scrawny blossom tree in its spring best. The flowers were chalky pink, beautiful.

I glanced at the sun and again at the tree, estimating it was a kilometre away. Why not? I could take a pressed flower home for Zoska to copy and maybe another for a young lady of the Watch I had my eye on. What I had not expected, though, was the macrofarm's fence between me and tree, impenetrable even for a Scout equipped to the eyeballs. I followed it hopefully and came at last to a spot where an animal had burrowed beneath it. There was just room for Raffy, but not if she were humpbacked: I had to discard the pack in order to squeeze through.

The detour had eaten at the daylight and the hill was dusked over by the time I arrived at the tree. Feeling

uneasy, I decided not to stay long and reached for a blossom. There was a growl and automatically I jumped into the branches as a low shaggy shape came up the slope towards me. It was a feral dog and it was followed by its brethren.

They clustered snarling around the base of the tree and I climbed higher. Hormones from the macrofarm had affected this tree's growth: it was some seven metres high, with sturdy branches. I sat in the highest of these, watching the dogs leap upward, snapping teeth on air and scrabbling their paws on the bark before falling to earth again. I was well out of reach, but I cursed, the dogs replying in their language. Any idiot would have checked the heat sensor for these pests, or considered that they might have dug under the fence Any idiot, but not Raffy.

Packless I was not quite defenceless, wearing under my camo shirt a weapon as unphallic as a dyke could make it. I took out the gun and shot experimentally at the dog chieftain, remembering my target practice with the Scouts. It was close: there was a smell of singed hair and the pack ran off a little, yelping. I gloated until I registered another smell, that of singed tree. The shot had nicked a lower bough, had almost cut it through.

Rather than whittle my sanctuary away I stopped, and the dogs settled under the tree for a long wait. I considered my options: the gun had a limited number of charges and the waning light would not improve my aim. Better to wait until the morning. I ate a couple of blossoms and found them tasteless, then had the joy of a half-eaten lolly Urszula had dropped in my pocket during the farewell. Lest I fall in sleep, I buckled my belt around flesh and tree trunk. The sun set and like the dogs I waited.

In the darkness maybe I slept, for when I awoke suddenly it was moonrise and all the landscape silvery. There was a pawing and moaning at the foot of the tree, as the dogs milled around something strange—a metal canister. As I watched it emitted white mist; the dogs sniffed at it and whined. I could smell chemicals now,

stupefying, and below the dogs were staggering like drunks. I pulled my scarf over my face for a filter, feeling weak and glad of the belt that bound me.

Walking among the fallen, twitching forms was a figure oddly distorted around the face. It stopped and stared upwards at my form outlined against branches and sky.

"Here, catch!" and it threw a package to me expertly. The gift was a mask like the mask, I saw now, of the giver. I pulled it over my head and breathed freely again.

"You can come down now."

For the first time I noticed the lower timbre: a man's voice. Was I going from frying pan to firing squad? I began to pick at my self-made bonds watching *him* all the while. The canister had disgorged its drug and he was walking from dog to dog, pressing a rod against each head. There was a faint click, then death.

A deep-voiced thank you, I decided, then scram! I rebuckled my belt and clambered down, too fast, for in the haste I put foot to the half-severed branch. It cracked beneath me and I fell in a shower of pink flowers made silver. With a splintering crash, bough, Raffy and all hit earth, just missing the hillock of a dead dog.

"Are you all right?"

He was bending over me now, and I heard him draw his breath in deep. I looked and noticed my leg caught between wood and ground. Funny, it never used to bend that way.

"If you don't mind me saying so, that's a godawful break. I'll have to take you back to the farm."

He was fumbling in a pocket of his coat.

"Can't have you screaming blue murder all the way there . . . sorry about this, mate."

His hand emerged from the pocket with another canister, and simultaneously he reached forward and snapped my mask off.

"Sorry," he repeated and cracked the canister under my nose.

Much later I awoke in yellow artificial light and found

myself lying on a table, head propped up on foam. There was a machine covering one leg.

"Robo doctor," he said, from where he sat watching. "They gave me one 'cos I'm all alone here."

I stared at him; a smallish man with a lined, weary face, not young, not particularly muscled, and not threatening at the moment, although you never could trust them.

"Well, say something! Think you'll give yourself away? I can tell you're a woman."

"Womyn."

"And that you're one of those."

"I'm Raph-ael."

"That's a man's name, an archangel's."

"My mother says angels don't have gender, so there."

"Your mum knows her theology, Raphael. I'm Benedict. That means blessings, and I don't mean you harm. I even left your toy with you."

Sure enough, my right hand had been folded around the gun. I lifted both cautiously.

"Don't burn me," he said, and I lowered my hand.

"We aren't all beasts," he said seriously, and at that moment the machine on my leg thrummed. He got up to inspect it, and satisfied, lifted it off. Revealed were my camo pants cut off at mid-thigh and the rest encased in pale, stiff plastic.

"Like I said, bad break, and you'll find bruises and cuts too. To get you down to my transport I had to hook your belt onto the branch and drag it behind me like a peacock's tail."

Our gaze met.

"You're bigger than me, in case you hadn't noticed."

Perhaps he expected me to smirk. I merely changed the subject: "Can I have some water? That mist dehydrates."

"I'll make some coffee, grow it myself. Ambrosia!"

I looked puzzled, and he added: "Food of the gods."

"Goddesses."

He disappeared from my view, and I got up on one elbow to see where I was. From the curving plastic walls I guessed

I was inside a housing module, but the high-tech was offset by an incredible mess. There was furniture, mainly in disrepair, plants in pots, odd bits of machinery, some half-dismantled, tools, rusty wire, music tapes, collections of coloured stones—clutter everywhere. Vaguely I wondered how Benedict had managed to bring me in here, then realised with a grimace that he must have carried me.

When he returned from the small cook-unit set against one wall he handed me a cup, taking care our flesh never touched in the transaction.

"How did you find me?"

"I'm the caretaker, I know what goes on down the farm. The dogs showed up on the heat sensor when they broke in and so did you. When all the blips were grouped round the old cherry I could kill two jobs at once: get the pack and see who you were. From the wavelength I knew it was a human."

"Homo sapiens."

He put his cup down on the table hard. "Raphael, I've been talking to you fifteen minutes and this is the third time you've corrected me!"

"It offends my sensibilities."

"And being corrected offends mine!"

We glared at each other and he sighed.

"Sorry, I'm not used to *people* much. Maybe I'll leave you and your leg alone for now."

He went over to a packing case and dragged out a blanket, which he draped carefully on the table beside me.

"I sleep in the next module. If you want something, scream."

He shuffled away, following some invisible path that led him to the door without falling over anything. Pausing at the threshold, he put his hand to a knob in the plastic and the yellow glare dimmed down to nightlight.

"Thanks for the rescue," I said, and threw the blanket over my head before he could respond.

Daylight shining through the translucent plastic woke me, that and a pain in my groin.

"Benedict!"

He appeared in the doorway, in a change of clothes, but unshaven.

"I wanna piss!"

"Oh gawd," he said, looking from door to table and at the mess in between. I flung off the blanket and slid to a one-legged stop on the floor, forcing the issue.

He bent down and rose with a large broom, which he used to clear a haphazard path from me to the exit. Experimentally I hopped, and nearly went face first into a robot of some kind, its sharp guts exposed for maintenance. As I wobbled, he restored my balance with a hand to my sleeve.

"Can you lean on me, perhaps?"

Once Boz and I had gone out of the ghetto to visit Bea, now Urszula's Bea, and a man had grabbed at me. After we had rubbed his face in a mud puddle it had vaguely registered that his flesh felt no different from a womyn's. Then, as now.

Benedict lived in three small modules, living, sleeping and bathroom, all detached from each other and set in a circle. Although the day was overcast and chill it felt good to be outside, so afterwards I let go of him and sat on the little grass courtyard between the ovals of plastic. He brought coffee and insta-bread from the module and we breakfasted.

"Raphael . . ."

Only Granua called me that, and now Benedict. After his outburst I did not want to correct him again, to say: *Just Raffy.*

"What's to be done with you?"

"I'll contact the Sisters. There's a communicator in my pack."

"Pack, where?" and I said. "By the hole under the fence."

He groaned.

"Knew I'd have to fix it sometime. Okay, I'll kill two jobs again: get your handbag and seal the fence."

It was starting to drizzle, so he helped me inside again, then left. I very soon got bored silly in the crowded room and gazing around spotted a fat old book. After one glance I dropped it—full of strange words. Then I thought to clean my gun and found that Benedict had removed the charges when I was unconscious.

When he came back I threw it at him, shouting: "Pig!"

The impact left a white mark on his face, but he stood still as the gun clattered to the floor.

"How was I to know you wouldn't fry me for laying hands on you?"

"I don't care! Pig!"

His gaze flitted about the room.

"You've been at my Shakespeare."

I recalled the name on the old book.

"I'd have ripped it to shreds if I'd known you valued it."

He lunged forward and grabbed the volume. "For that I'd have killed you."

I had never cared for poetry, thanks to Grania, and so was struck mum by his feeling.

"You've never heard of Bill," he said sadly and opened the book. Seeing him distracted, I snatched at the pack, but he deftly kicked my good leg from under me. I fell heavily, breath and pride knocked out of me. While I lay, he began quietly to read:

"O! She doth teach the torches to burn bright.
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear;
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,
As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.
The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,
And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.
Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night."

I was a captive audience, but it was words rather than a

shackle of plastic that held me. Words that summoned memories: in front of me was the beautiful face of a dark girl who had come just once into the ghetto. I had made enquiries about her and found her irrevocably straight, so I kicked a wall and went on living.

(Never would a face have the same effect on me until, years later, I came back from Haven to find little Honey had grown up. But by then I knew Romeo's speech by rote.)

Benedict stopped, and spoke his own words:

"See, it's not all rapes."

I was sitting up by then, he dropped the pack into my lap and went out. I opened it, found the communicator and began to cry.

"What is it?" he asked from the doorway

"I can't. I've blown it, I'm better off dead."

He sat down on the arm of a laden armchair.

"Have you noticed, Raphael, that I've never asked you what you're doing out here? You lot haven't been careful enough. For months now there's been rumours on the computer of walkers in the waste, consortiums nobody's heard of waving big money, a girl dressed like you found dead in a dioxin dump . . ."

I scowled, remembering how the Scouts had ascribed the death to inexperience: "Poor thing, let her go alone too soon." Now they would say the same about Raffy.

"Stop crying. I don't care what you're up to so long as I'm left alone. And I never dob in anyone. Call the ladies!"

Maybe I trusted him, but the Sisters never would. Besides:

"I'd be a laughing stock, skiving off after flowers and having to be rescued by an andro! They'd never let me scout again."

"So," he said. "I'm not going to tell my bosses and you're not going to tell your bossesses What then?"

"How long before I walk?"

"Coupla months. The robo gave you a calcium accelerator, but you can't hurry *Mother* Nature."

He was looking glum and the emotion was infectious; the consequences of our silence were an unwanted guest for him and dependence on a man for me

"I can modify a robo into transport for you," he said. "But it'll take time."

"Gimme materials and I'll make crutches."

He fished in the litter behind the chair, emerging with an all-purpose kit, its plastic grimy and dented.

"You can make one crutch from the broom—never use it anyway. I'll see what's handy for the other."

He was half out the door when I yelled at him: "Benedict! I want something else."

He turned and I tapped the gun meaningfully.

"Promise you won't burn me?"

"I promise only if you promise not to . . ."

I stopped, for an extraordinary expression of grief had taken hold of his face.

"Lord, what we've done to deserve this, and rightly too!"

He took the charges from his coat pocket and rolled them across the floor to me, where they were stopped by my leg in its plastic chitin. I picked them up, counted them, slotted them into their pods—and looked up to see that Benedict had gone.

Good, because I needed to consider the strange situation we had fallen into. An analogy came to mind: Edge City, when two wildly differing ghetto factions united against the middle ground. Just because their interests coincided did not mean opportunities were lost for mischief to each other; I should remember that. He had several Edges on me: mobility and his computer, wherever it was, with which he could summon his bosses if the guest proved irksome. On the other hand I had the Edges of a gun and my communicator, for a last-resort SOS.

Thinking of a Mayday caused me to remember that I had not given my daily position report to the ghetto. I glanced at my watch, noting I was several hours late. If I didn't send the Scouts off on a wild-gorse chase they

would go straight to my last location, just south of the site, and from there track me to the macrofarm. Loss of face for me; but of life for Benedict, who despite his hospitality would be killed out of hand.

I unfolded my map, looking for a labyrinth or tanglewood, and found a marsh, probably once a sewage farm. It was off course, perfect. I fed its coordinates into the flute, a coding device that unravelled information into its component yarns and sent it across space, to be knit up only at the other end. "Chased by wild dogs," I added for explanation, and flicked the communicator to receiving mode.

A jumble of symbols appeared on the little screen, resolving first into letters, then words. "OK. Come on home." Whoever was on the other end was in a laconic mood. I had a moment of conscience, as I remembered Zoska, Boz and my other foster sisters, even despised Grania—then I turned the communicator off.

"The rest is silence," I said, as I returned the communicator to my pack.

Benedict spoke from the doorway, and I jumped:

"Do you know where that comes from?"

"How long have you been there?"

"Only long enough to hear you quote Bill."

He came in lugging a collection of staves.

"Any of these do?"

"Yeah, the longest," and we set to woodwork. Our hands dipped in and out of the kitbox, never coinciding

After a while he returned to the quotation:

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Probably my mother."

"The authority on angels?"

"Yeah, I've got two mothers." He blinked. "One gave birth to me, the other reared me."

"So which knows Bill?"

"My blood mother, Grania Erato."

"Poetry woman, eh?"

Now I blinked, then I remembered that he read.

"You know her?"

He shook his head.

"I only read one book. See Raphael, I decided long ago that a man, begging your pardon, didn't have time to read everything. There's too many people writing and nearly all of them are mediocre. There ought to be a pogrom—they hide the really good writers with their verbiage. So I just stuck with the very best."

He gestured at the book.

"Before you flare up at me again, I'm not saying your mum's no good. I never read her . . . I'm restricted in my reading."

"But how do you know she writes verse?"

"Erato's the muse of love poetry."

"How pretentious," I said without thinking, and bit my lip, too late.

He looked at me, reading more than I wished him to, so I bent over the crutch and worked like a machine. After a pause, he followed suit. Even when we broke briefly for more bread and coffee, we did not speak—until the crutches were finished.

"Yeay!"

I pulled myself up to standing and fitted the pads under my arms. Suddenly Raffy metamorphosed from crawling caterpillar to a mummy-long legs, with limbs of wood, plastic and flesh. It was fleet, in a lurching fashion, for with three long steps I was down Benedict's pathway and outside, being buffeted by the late afternoon wind.

"Whee!"

He had followed me outside protectively.

"Don't overdo it. Years ago I was on those things and I took days getting used to them. Don't think because you're muscled like a racehorse that you won't be sore."

Just for that, I left the courtyard, hopping through the gaps between the modules to the farm proper. It consisted of more modules, but giant, in row after row with tidy concrete paths in between. I lolloped to the nearest and stared through the plastic opaqued by my breath, like a

child at a shop window. There were many green plants, and the glint of steel as a robot gardener rolled up and down.

I glanced behind me and saw Benedict watching like a guardian angel. Irritated by his solicitude I swung away from the wall and went for a long walk along concrete, walled in always by plastic. He did not follow, perhaps expecting a clout over the head with a crutch.

When I returned, doused in sweat and radiating heat like a boiler, I found the courtyard littered with Benedict's junk. Dust blew like a mist from the door of the living module.

I sat down with a thump on the packing case and at the noise he came out, wearing a faded red scarf over his grizzled hair.

"You want your broom back for the spring-cleaning?"

He scowled. "I'm making space. If you're living here you'll need territory of your own. For *my* sanity I'm making a moiety of the living room."

"Need help?"

He stared at me. "Move furniture when you've buggered yourself with the most strenuous walk you could manage? Braggadacian!"

He disappeared inside again and I, feeling parched, went to the bathroom to get a drink without disturbing him. There was a mirror there, overlooked previously, and it reflected the new face like a stranger. I saw a girl weary and strained, with twigs in her brown hair and smears from bark on her face. The man's glass told me what I had not noticed in his gaze: this girl was attractive.

The water splashed into my hands and I longed for a bath, but only cleaned my face. To strip, and to have him sneak up behind me . . .

When I went out it was sunset and I shivered at the memory of dogs and flowers. I sat on the crate again and watched lights come on inside the living module. It resembled a giant phosphorescent slug.

"You can come in now, Raphael."

Within, a low wall had been built of odds and ends; on one side was Benedict's clutter, on the other was an area cleared of all save a mattress with my pack and blanket set neatly upon it.

"I'll make the wall higher, give you privacy, promise. I'm just out of energy now."

"It's not urgent," I lied politely.

He grunted and dodged effortlessly to the cook-unit, where a saucepan bubbled. I looked for the table and found it pushed against the wall, at the end of the path. There were two chairs by it; I sat down and noticed the Shakespeare on the table, like a second guest for dinner.

Benedict brought stewpot, cutlery and crockery to the table.

"Let good digestion wait on appetite!"

"I suppose that's in your book too," I said.

'Bill says something about everything."

Chit-chat was forgotten then, as we ate like a pair of wild beasts. When the meal was over I reached for the book.

"What are you doing?" he asked suspiciously.

"Seeing what he says about the likes of me . . . *them*, as you put it. What's this, *The Taming of the* . . ."

"I doubt you'll find it there," he said and pulled the book from me. "How 'bout this: 'Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust? To make account of her life to a clod of wayward marl?' That's feminist at least."

"Nice. Who is she?"

"Lass called Beatrice. A bit like you: fierce "

I twitched the book into my grasp again, accidentally losing the place. In front of me was a list of names followed by their speeches and I looked for Beatrice.

"Phooey. Here she's saying: 'I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest' to a clod named . . ."

"Benedick," he finished. Picking up the book he walked to the door.

"Goodnight," he said without turning.

"Goodnight."

I fidgeted for a while then shoved the robot against the door and went to sleep. In the morning I was awakened by the sound of an electric motor. Moving, I found my muscles sore (prophetic Benedict!), but pushed the robot aside and swung out. The courtyard was empty but through the gap I could see Benedict atop a squat vehicle with fat rubber wheels. He zoomed it down a pathway and out of sight.

Tied to the largest bit of the courtyard junk was a note: "Off to check fences. Back late today. Place yours."

I stood there like a tripod, listening to the motor fade out of earshot. How lovely to be alone again! Then my solitude was interrupted by the tock of rain -within moments my hair was soaked and drops trickled down my neck. I laughed, throwing my head back to drink rain, and went to the bathroom module to finish what the cloudburst had begun. Only the mirror marred my mood; its big round eye seemed prurient so I made it stare at the wall.

Showered, I went searching for Benedict's computer and found the console behind a filing cabinet that looked as if the robot had kicked it in a pet. Raffy was never a hacker, except for a romantic summer with the ghetto's computer whiz, yet the sight revived memories. Benedict was no hacker either, for log-on instructions were taped to the keyboard. There was no password, but I guessed "Shakespeare" and guessed right.

The screen lit up with a list of options and I chose "Security" and after that "Heat Sensor". An infra red picture of the farm covered the screen, with the small blips of wildlife and one big blip moving slowly around the perimeter. It would appear Benedict was truthful. I returned to the original list and took the option "Maintenance". This killed the curious kitten for diagram after confusing diagram of the giant modules appeared. The care involved indicated that the green crop I had glimpsed so briefly was highly lucrative. What was it? Best not ask. The seclusion of the farm and the fact that the

intermediaries had not been able to discover the names of its owners argued a need for secrecy.

Benedict returned after dark, to the lukewarm half of a meal I had concocted from various odd edibles found around the cook-unit. He devoured it, then looked closely at me.

"Good, you had a bath. Thought if I went away you would—you were starting to pong."

I was silent, and he gazed around the module. After my hacking I had got sick of having to weave through his mess like a drunkard, so had added the more manoeuvrable furniture to the wall.

"And you made space! I can work in here."

"What on?"

"Robo-digger. To modify for *your* transport."

"I've got wood legs."

He shook his head.

"Very soon you'll find them restricting."

He spread a plastic groundsheet on the floor and wheeled in the digger, which—shovel apart—was the baby of his transport. I opened my mouth and he said, raising his voice an octave:

"Need help?" Then, in his normal pitch, "No thanks Raphael, unless you're an expert on robotics."

I shook my head, reluctantly. He grinned, then saw my expression and pulled the corners of his mouth down.

"Why don't you talk to me while I work?"

"About what?"

"The ghetto. See, I'm curious it's natural with something that excludes you. Years ago, before your wall went up, I walked through the ghetto fringes. Dirty looks galore, but nobody beat me up. I suppose being a little tich saved me."

I agreed silently.

"What did you see, Benedict?"

"Nothing much, just no men."

I snorted and he blushed rosy pink.

"I was only there five minutes, girl."

I gazed at him, gauging what information to give and what to withhold. At Bea's house I had met straight women who would politely, deviously, direct the conversation to my lifestyle. All I need do was think of the most unsound of them, add a dash of caution, and I would have a recipe for Benedict.

"Why are you staring at me?" he asked.

Just for a moment, the image of a woman had flickered on his face.

"It's just a place where womyn live. We have the wall, and beyond that are 'suburbs' where feminists and dykes who don't mind mixing"—like Bea and Grania "live. The Watch, that's our Police, call them the first line of defence. Softcores live just inside the wall, hardcores further in."

"What's them?"

"Degrees of ideological rigidity."

"And what are you?"

"Guess," I said coldly.

"In between, I'd say."

Correct, but he needn't know that. He waited, then ventured: "What of your economy?"

"The suburbans pay tithes from their work in the andro's world." Grania had been bankrolling the ghetto for decades, to name one prominent instance "There's also workshops, factories, where goods are made to sell Outside."

"Like what?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

"Knitting," he fished, half-seriously. I smiled at his little joke and also at the thought of the systems that my old hacker love marketed to a lot of blissful ignoramuses

"The ideal is self-sufficiency," I said, imagining the walled Haven in the country, our City of Womyn.

"In more ways than one," he muttered. "I've heard talk of a Hive."

Loose lips! I thought, but continued, trying not to let the exchange become an Edge Game.

"It's the centre, for us. To stay there long is to forget

that your kind exist. Call it an editing device."

Any mention of andros was forbidden in our temple to the Gyn principle, which caused some bizarre conversations. Once Urszula, being a brat, had asked Zoska in front of hardcores where babies came from. ("Yes Mama, but what makes the baby grow in your belly? Why aren't I growing one now?") She had got a flustered answer about cabbages and my accompanying raucous laughter got me thrown out of the Hive for the very first time. It had been "unseemly", in this quiet place decorated with murals of Ishtar, Athena and Joan of Arc sans Ur-Nammu, Zeus and the English clerics. I could feel uplifted, even refreshed in the Hive but ultimately it was claustrophobic. All restrictions annoy Raffy.

Benedict should not hear criticisms, but neither could I voice vague platitudes. I clammed up. The cessation obviously irritated him, for he began to quote his Bill, half to himself, a quarter to the digger and a quarter to me. I listened until we parted for the night.

In the morning it rained again, and Benedict's robotics were interrupted by the visit of a truck. He dealt with it, returned, and worked with a mixture of care and haste. By a happy coincidence the sun poked out moments after the contraption was finished. He pushed it out into the courtyard and through a gap to the start of a sloping path.

"Hop on."

He took the crutches, slotting them into a niche at the back of the transport.

"Oh, so that's what it's for."

"That, by your hand, is direction and this is speed. This starts the motor."

I forestalled him and switched it on myself. As the machine purred he grinned at his handiwork. Seeing him off-guard I put my hand hard on the speed button.

"Hey, wait! Whoa!"

"Wowee!"

The machine shot down the path straight for one of the giant modules, and I grabbed the steering just in time to

execute a two-wheeled turn. To show Benedict I had mistressed the vehicle I did a circuit of the module and risked glancing behind for his reaction. He was open mouthed like a yokel, so with a wave I disappeared around the module again.

When I had explored on crutches I had found the farm monotonous; riding, it was the same, although I passed a processing plant and the road for the trucks, which relieved the uniformity. There was more fun in being Raffy the speed maniac, careering around like a pinball. Pride cometh before a crash, of course, and I was sobered by a near collision with a robot gardener.

"Roadhog!" I shouted at its featureless metal carapace, largely to cover the pain from my leg, which had been jarred. Then I continued down the path and found I was free of modules in open, tussocked country. Still adventurous, I rode to the fence and back, but at an invalid's pace.

It was late when I puttered nervously up to Benedict's home, and to my relief he was not waiting outside. I parked the transport and became a stick insect again.

He was sitting at the console.

"Have a nice time?"

"Yes, thank you."

"I watched your blip until it slowed down. Then I did some hacking."

I poled to where I could see the screen, which resembled the old samplers displayed in the Hive: across the screen was verse, Granua's verse.

"Battersea blues couldn't keep me apart
I got to play songs in a grimy gutter
With you along—your clutter.

There's leaves in your hair, have you
been dancing with your old man again?
Walk on the wind of September evening
Don't come down until I've finished playing.

Lend me a mood, oh no
I'm not wistful, not jealous.
I have the music and you have the heart
Battersea blues couldn't keep me apart."

"She was very young when she wrote that," I said. "She still had her father's name."

"So I saw."

"You didn't get far with her verse."

"On the contrary. I accessed the biography first, which was mainly a list of prizes, then the contents page of the *Collected Works*. There were lots of poems about R. and Raphael, but I thought you'd thump me if I read them. So I accessed the cheapest poem about anything else."

"Thanks."

"Amazing! She's said thank you to me twice in one conversation."

There was a round scrap of plastic temptingly near; I leaned on one crutch and savagely batted it across the module with the other. It hit the wall with a satisfying clunk.

"I live in glass. Anything she hears about me goes into her verse! Vampire!"

"The parent feeds the child and then feeds off him . . . her."

I stared at him.

"You're not unique," he said. "With me it was my father"

"My father was 10cc of sticky fluid," I said viciously. He ignored the goad.

"Lucky you."

He switched off the console.

"Dad was a drunk. Only good thing he did was desert the family. Trouble was he kept coming back."

I too had been incompletely deserted.

"Mum was all right," he said. "Earth mother type."

"Like my foster mother."

"That's right," he recalled. "You said you had two."

"She says the world's oldest profession isn't whoring,

it's motherhood. That's what she does."

"She good at it?"

I laughed. "You thunk so, on the evidence of me?"

"I meant, is she respected for it?"

"It's high status in the ghetto."

Zoska had been nominated as an Elder, but had dodged the election by beginning Basienka.

"That's how it should be," he said.

Both of us had become embarrassed by the confessions, and so gravitated to the table, where there was a bowl of fresh greens.

"Grow it myself," he said proudly. "One of the perks of the job."

"That and being alone," I said, and he nodded, a little too emphatically. We sat and ate, crushing crisp leaves between our teeth. The crunching made me aggressive, revived my daredevil high with the transport. Foolhardy as ever, I decided on an Edge Game. If Benedict was in a confessing mood, he might give information valuable to the ghetto and my curiosity.

I waved a strip of bok choi: "You grow other greens in the modules."

"You noticed?"

This was not a good sign, but I persisted: "I don't know botany, but they're like no plants I've seen."

"They're intoxicants. The only other perk of the job."

I had not expected him to fold so easily. Careful, a biochemical sensor warned.

"They come from what used to be the Amazon rainforest. Got saved from extinction when a scientist et one and had a nice time. They're still only quasi-legal, like the other substances that relax society's rules a little That's why this farm is far from awkward questions "

He paused. "Except when asked by Raphaels. You want to try some?"

We were both on the razor's edge now. His suggestion had caught me off-guard, but to signal that might be dangerous. I had to answer quickly.

"Sure."

He went out and I grinned like a wedge of cheese. Free intoxicant!

Benedict was gone a long time and returned, not with the expected green sheaf, but carrying a small box.

"Could have got raw stuff, just pull it off the vine, but it's rough. This is processed, ready for the truck."

He opened the box, to reveal grey crystals, more intoxicant than I had ever seen before. I nodded warily, thinking about dosages—in the ghetto only Boz had had a stronger head than Raffy for the drug. He set the box on the table and to my surprise ignited the crystals. A soft grey smoke, reminiscent of Zoska's old homespun shawl, drifted upwards.

"This is freebasing. Extravagant, but the best."

I attempted the worldly-wise expression of a drug savant, and obviously failed, for he continued:

"This extract's euphoric. Other types make people concentrate, make 'em sexy, send 'em to sleep . . . the many words that describe emotions, they're all covered by the drug. It's a universal, like Bill."

The smoke swirled round me, like the three witches on a panel in the Hive.

"Weird sisters," he said, and I goggled· did the drug cause telepathy?

"From the book," he explained. "Want to hear it?"

"Yes."

He read from his memory, speech after fantastical speech, and I savoured them. All, except for the initial extract from *Macbeth*, were descants on the theme of heterosexual love, which might have been oppressive had not the language transcended gender. I heard the love-talk of men and women, and interpreted it as that of womyn.

He stopped, dried out, and an eerie silence descended. The room was a ball of smoke and we were silhouettes to each other. Feeling nervous, I moved closer to him, and he turned his head.

"Did that upset you?"

"No."

"Very sexist. I'm sorry. I forgot with you it was girl and girl."

"It's much like the other," I said, recalling the language.

"Really? You've tried?"

I was feeling pleasantly confused.

"No, although Grania said I'd try anything except incest and folk dancing."

He had never seemed threatening; that was his advantage, or Edge. Perhaps to convince myself he was still there, in this witches' brew, or perhaps for Raffy's damned curiosity, I reached out and touched him. His chest was as hard as that of a prepubescent girl.

"Is this an advance?" he said, cautiously flattered.

It was now Raffy is also tactile.

He put his hand reverently over mine—they were almost the same size.

"Who'd have thought it? An old man like me."

Actually he was younger than Grania Our other hands were grappled now.

"I'm out of practice," he said, and glanced around. The smoke had cleared a little.

"Not on that hard little mattress," I said.

We stood up and I teetered as I tried to fit the crutches.

"Are we ever stoned!" he said "You'll never make it out the door."

He tried to lift me but got hopelessly tangled with a crutch, and nearly fell over himself.

"Any suggestions?"

"Pig-back," I said muzzily.

He laughed: "Yeah, appropriate for a pig"

He knelt in front of me and I stood on my good leg, tucking the crutches under one arm.

"Hupsy-daisy," he said, and I rode him out the door to the sleeping module.

I awoke, again to daylight diffused through module plastic, and looked into the face of Benedict. Asleep, he

looked like something the cat had dragged in: a little beat-up mouse.

As if on cue he opened his eyes.

"Raphael, that was sweet."

I rolled over on my back, to get the weight off my cast and also to escape his sooky expression. There, above me, was flesh, holos of naked women, all breasts, buttocks, thighs, taped to the module ceiling. They had a look of vacuous unreality suggesting the counterfeit; if not, they were like no womyn I had ever seen.

It had been dark in here last night. Intentionally? He saw my expression and groaned like a creaky door. I shot up and began to extract my clothes from the mess around his bed, swearing under my breath. Pulling on a garment I overbalanced and fell on top of him; he lay still beneath me. I scrambled up again and finished dressing. Then I found my crutches at the foot of the bed and poled furiously for the living module. There was a box of grey ash on the table and I knocked it to the floor, before grabbing my pack and heading for my transport.

He was standing in the courtyard, wrapped in a blanket.

"Raphael!" he shouted. "I'm only human and I mean a man!"

"That's no excuse!"

I started the motor and sped away, making a grand exit. Moments later I remembered my gun: should I return and use it? No. I never wanted to see him again.

My intent had been to follow the roboroad to the gate, the weak spot in most defences. However in my haste I had made a wrong turning and was as lost among identical paths and modules as an ant on a draughtsboard. The sun was out; I estimated east and headed that way. The maze of modules ended and I continued towards the fence, thinking to circumnavigate to the farm entrance. Idly I noticed the tracks of a larger transport on the grass before me. Then there was a cherry bough, its flowers withered and dry, and beyond it, up a steep slope, the rock-a-bye-Raffy tree.

I pulled the communicator and held it in my hand like a shell. It was no use, for the same restrictions still applied. If I returned to the ghetto on a stolen transport questions would still be asked about my leg. For expediency's sake I would have to return and make peace with Benedict.

I drove along the fence to the gate, as planned, and found it open. Was this an invitation to leave? If so, I refused it and took the road back to Benedict.

He was waiting outside this time, looking worried.

"Why didn't you go?"

Dismounting, I tapped the cast with a crutch, in answer: it made a dull sound, like a prison door slamming.

"Yes, but after what we did? I did?"

His tone was guilty and something occurred to me: he had mentioned that the drug could make people "sexy".

"Benedict, was there aphrodisiac in that blend?"

"A little," he said sheepishly, a repentant ram. "Didn't think it'd work."

I struck him with a crutch, not hard, but sufficient to send him reeling back against the nearest piece of junk. He hit it at an angle, gashing his scalp Blood dribbled down like water into his eyes.

"I can't see! Raphael, help!"

He was crouched on the ground, both hands over the wound. There was no way I could lift him.

"Stand up!" I said like the Watch Chief and he obeyed.

"Easy. I'm here."

He reached one blood-sticky hand out to the voice. I anchored the crutches and took hold of it.

"Inside," he said. "Doctor!"

Now I had the problem of getting him to the living module, for while he clasped me as though drowning I could not use the crutches They required both hands. A sudden gust of wind flapped my scarf, left untied in the hasty dressing, and I had an idea.

"Benedict, let go!"

Very slowly, he complied.

"Now take this," I said, and brushed one fringed end of

the scarf against his fingers. He took it, and I wrapped the other end around one crutch handgrip. Carefully I swung into the module, leading him by an embroidered tether.

"The lame leading the blind," he said.

Inside I sat him down at the table and found the doctor unit. When I activated it, the optical sensors swivelled and it made a clicking noise, tsk, tsk, tsk. Metal hands shot out of the body and began to minister. Within minutes the blood had been cleaned from him and the hair shaved from around the gash, which was staunched with a dab of sealant. The robot went into inert mode and I switched it off.

He opened his eyes and stared down at an anthill of spilt ash. Absently he smoothed it with the side of his hand.

"Raphael . . ."

"Yes?"

He doodled in the ash with a forefinger, then erased the design.

"Don't hit me again, but I'm not protected against fertility. Are you?"

I sat down too, feeling sick to my boots.

"Of course not. And I'm at full moon."

He sighed, and as if his head was suddenly too heavy, rested his cheek on the ashy hand. Realising too late, he withdrew the hand and stared at it glumly.

"Next it'll be sackcloth."

I made no reply.

"Say something. Laugh at slapstick old me "

"The doctor," I said incoherently.

"They programmed it for a man on his own, no gynecology. I've heard that jumping with your legs in splints . . ."

"Very funny."

"Well, surely the ghetto has herbal remedies."

"No need."

"No, I suppose not."

"I'm *not* speaking to you," and with that I retired behind

the wall of China, or rather of junk, and huddled under the blanket. After a pause he went out, and I heard the noise of his transport, moving away.

He did not come into the living module the rest of that day, nor did I go out—thus we avoided each other. The following day the pattern was reversed: I took the little transport out around the farm while he was a stay-at-home. In this way we had the necessary illusion of being alone. If our paths crossed the junctions were marked by a chilling silence.

The routine was finally aborted one rainy morning, as we breakfasted—he on fresh-brewed coffee and I on food-concentrate from the pack. An electronic whine crossed the wall.

"The heat sensor!" he said, and dashed to the console. I followed in seven-league strides.

"What is it?"

He jabbed a stubby finger at the screen.

"Figures, just north Your mates?"

I leaned closer to stare at the sexless blobs. The marsh had been north of the farm.

"Relax, this isn't the dyke cavalry. They're just being curious."

(Taking a look at the farm and also the site, but I couldn't say that.)

He frowned.

"Don't think much of their tracking. You and the tree were on the other side."

"I gave them a position reading for the marsh centre."

"Gulper? They could have been killed looking for you there."

After all that had happened since I had crawled under the fence, I should have been immune to shock Yet that jarred me. With my luck it would probably be Boz.

"Well, I didn't know it was dangerous. If I hadn't they'd have burst in here thinking I'd been kidnapped for a sex slave—which is partly true."

He winced.

"Take the cart and catch up with them."

They would come back and kill you, I thought, but only said: "I'd be pitied for the rest of my life."

"A fate worse than death," he said drily.

"And what if I were carrying?"

We had agonised silently about that question for three days now, but to voice it hurt not at all. He took the cue quickly.

"Any reason you might not?"

"I never tried. And you?"

"The ladies all took precautions. I never got close to one so she'd stop using them and have my baby . . . have a child with me."

I rocked on the crutches and considered.

"What are our options?"

"One—nothing's cooking. Two, there is, but you want to stop it."

That option was tricky: the knowledge lay outside the ghetto and I would have to consult with feminists, who might blab.

"Three, you don't."

"It might be a boy!" I cried. How unpleasant, to have the enemy growing inside me.

"Can't see him being reared by manhaters," he said.

"I suppose you'd want to keep him."

"I just remember," he said reasonably, "the one nice thing my dad did with me, which was fishing. Sitting by a stream, if I can find one unpolluted, teaching a small me . . ."

"Small you!"

He looked at me.

"He might take after his tearaway mum."

There was a pause while I tried to imagine a male Raffy.

"You'd not let me keep a girl?" he said.

I shrugged, recalling Grania's poems about father-daughter incest. On the other hand, the idea of returning to the ghetto with a female infant, claiming to have found her in bullrushes—the idea was preposterous.

"Look Benedict, aren't we counting chickens before they're hatched? There might be nothing in the eggshell."

"True," he said dubiously, and we left it at that. At least we were talking again, but the cautious camaraderie was gone. In the days that followed we ate together, did odd jobs around the farm together, but were emotionally apart. The book remained a common ground but we read it to ourselves separately.

Time passed in this waiting game. One day he put in hours at the terminal, while I hogged the book, enjoying the three witches and disagreeing with their images in the Hive (not evil enough). Sensing from his absorption that this was no farm matter, I sneaked up behind him, as quietly as a Woodeny could.

He was searching scientific literature, combining the terms "calcium accelerator" and "embryology".

"Raphael, quit reading over my shoulder," he said mildly.

"Tell me what you found first."

"See for yourself," and he dodged past me. I sat down at the terminal and saw that he had accessed several articles, full text. One dealt with white mice, the other with monotremes.

"What about people?"

"I tried that," he said from the other side of the room. "No research reports."

The door of the module slammed and I began to read the articles. The monotreme one was inconclusive and the white mice had eaten their young—not an encouraging prognosis.

I glanced back and saw that Benedict had snaffled the Shakespeare. Ah, well, it was his turn for it. To complete the reversal I began hacking myself, first checking the account to which the searches were credited. It worried me that Benedict's bosses might smell a lady rat if their employee ticked up searches unconnected with their product. However, the account was private, its searches until recently —solely of the database Shaklit.

I returned to the original enquiry and discarded "embryology" to concentrate on the drug that was healing my leg. After an hour I knew that in the young and healthy the period of accelerated cure could be as short as one month. I patted the cast thoughtfully; it would be rushing things, but if Option One occurred I could be away much sooner than Benedict expected. A quick getaway was desirable—he was starting to look sooky again.

He made one more attempt to discuss our possible parenthood:

"Have you decided yet?"

"On what?"

"Options Two or Three?"

"Oh Ishtar, it might well be neither!"

I stormed off, more bluster, for I was late and I think he knew it. Of course, the upsets I had experienced this month would have disturbed the cycle of a she-elephant. . .

One pale spring dawn I woke up very early and found it was Remembrance day, as in Grania's famous poem. Her words had never bobbed up in my mind much before, but now I was thinking in a mixture of Grania and Bill. I activated the doctor and addressed it to my leg. It whirred, clicked again, shone lights, prodded me here and there—and then it extruded a nozzle which sprayed the cast with pink mist. The plastic melted away as I watched, leaving not even a discarded cocoon to mark my change. The leg underneath was scaly and looked strange; I cautiously tried exercises then shuffled up and down. It was whole.

Much of my silence had been put to the devising of contingency plans, and I knew what to do. I laid the crutches aside and *walked* to the console, where I instructed the gates to open. Then I shouldered my pack and left, pausing only to streak blood on the door of the sleeping module: my explanation.

He must have slept late that morning, for I had escaped the farm and was following the road through thickets of yellow gorse before he came after me. Hearing the motor, I moved to the roadside. Prickly leaves brushed my bare

new leg -if I hid there I would be scratched raw. Instead I pulled out the gun, hating to use it.

Benedict was astride the little transport and for the first time I noticed, as he must have before, that riders of the converted digger looked absurd. He brought it to a stop on the other side of the road, several metres from me. Now I was in sight he seemed unable to speak.

"You got the message," I finally said.

He nodded. "Raphael! Not a word goodbye."

A buzzing insect shot past my head, going from gorse bush to gorse bush and incidentally from Raffy to Benedict. He continued:

"Oh I know that you couldn't predict what I'd do. Suspicious minds! I'm not here to compel you."

"What then?"

"I'm worried. What if you meet another pack of dogs? I know you accessed CA data, and that you think the leg's sound. But you could refracture if you run on it, and this time nobody might help you."

He was right: although I had paced myself carefully over the distance, I had developed a limp.

"Do you want to guard me back to the ghetto?"

"And ruin your reputation? No girl, just take the transport."

I started to demur, but he kept speaking:

"You can ditch it near the city. There's a homing circuit and it'll make its way back down the road."

"I can't."

He looked astounded.

"How do I repay you? I've taken and given nothing in return."

"But you have."

He clambered off the transport.

"Raphael, you've not been easy to live with. I cannot endure my Lady Tongue, not lately. But I've fallen in love with her."

He stopped.

"My first love! A lesbian who won't be tamed, won't

play Beatrice with Benedict."

Slowly he moved away from the vehicle.

"It's a gift to me if you take it, stops me imagining you et by dogs."

There was no real answer to this speech, not one which would satisfy him. I took one step, then two, towards the transport.

"Thank you," he said, when I got onto it.

"Thank you! Goodbye."

"Goodbye," he replied, his expression bleak. I started the motor and coasted away, glancing back now and then to see him standing there against the yellow like a spoon in mustard. A bend of the road hid him, and I never saw him again.

Now I knew how he had felt. Oh Honey! The emotional ache had become physical—I stared at Grania, and suffered.

"How could I forget?" she said. "You limped in here like a wounded bellatrice, expecting me to shred the—quite good—elegy I'd written for you. When I didn't, you told me what you thought of me. It was a strange speech, first ghetto-gutter, then becoming arcane and archaic. 'Cacodemon' was one word used—I had not heard it outside *Richard III*. How strange to hear it from my Raphael's foul mouth. When you finished, your womynly chest panting up and down like a bellows, I remarked, quoting as is my way . . ."

"'She was wont to speak plain and to the purpose . . . and now is she turned orthography, her words are a very fantastical banquet—just so many strange dishes.'"

"And you turned to the bookshelf, and following the alpha-beta round, you discovered Shakes-rags and opened it."

"I said, '*Much Ado About Nothing*, Act 2, Scene 3, nyaagh!'"

"Whereupon I remarked that while missing, presumed dead, you had attended classes on Shakespeare."

"And I told you the whole story."

"Which made me wonder why you, so secretive—"

"Because you write about me!"

". . . should spiel the most profound experience of your life. Raphael, I know a dare when I see one. You were daring me to write that Raphael Grania had fornicated with an andro. Being contrary, a trait you have inherited, I didn't."

"Would you, now?"

"It's stale bread news. Haven's half-completed and I doubt anyone would murder that poor man for slipping you a mickey thirteen years ago. The hardcores wouldn't like it, but you dislike them."

"I intend to marry into them."

This time she did blink.

"Oh, the sweet young thing. What's her name?"

"Honey Marthe."

"Is she pretty?"

"Very. And with a mother like a meataxe."

She put her pink hands to her mouth. "So that's why you want my silence!"

"I want a vow of it."

"On one condition."

"What?"

"Raphael, on that night you withheld information from your dear mamma. You never said what you thought of the heterosexual act."

I considered.

"Very well, but you must swear first."

"On something sacred. I know you."

Feeling foolish, as she no doubt intended, I knelt down by the chair and she put her heavy hand on my head. An opportunity for caress, I realised.

"I swear, on Raphael, not to tattle."

I stood up.

"That promise covers what I shall tell you."

She nodded.

"Spit it out, this byte, this titbit."

I was silent, thinking of words.

"Mumchance! I see I must interrogate you. Was it pleasurable?"

"Of course. But not the real thing. Hence Honey."

She stored the information away.

"Well, my heretic, we both lose by this transaction, you some privacy, I for not being able to put this grain through the art mill."

"Crushing me," I said, continuing the conceit.

"You exaggerate, nothing could do that. I know being muse-food, muesli, was irksome, but it cracked your indifference wonderfully. Naughty of me, but fun—you always bit."

"No more."

"No, if we are to be at peace. Allow me at least an epithalamium."

"You do that. Make it good."

Interview concluded, I strolled down the hall and out. The garden summoned memories of other flowers, but I brushed them away. Benedict, my apologies . . .

I returned to the ghetto, encountering the on-duty Watch at the gate. Considering my scuffles with that body, they were friendly, which made me suspect some support. This inkling and the news of Grania I wanted to share with Zoska, but when I returned to her little house, she was out. From Basienka's room came a voice singing lullabies, probably Urszula bullied into babysitting. Not wanting questions, I raided the larder, mouse-quiet, and went to bed. Sated physically but not emotionally, I slept.

In the morning Basienka awakened me by crawling into my bed with a huge rag doll.

"You want breakfast, kid?"

She considered it like a duchess.

"Yes."

"Well, we'll make some for everyone."

We brewed coffee, chopped fruit and toasted bread rolls, then I carried the tray into the bedroom. Zoska was weeping.

"What is it? Row with your lover again?"

In answer she waved her hand at the little radio beside the bed, which received only the ghetto's weak FM signal. I listened, to an Elder talking excitedly about—

"Parthenogenesis! They've done it at last!"

Zoska blew her nose loudly.

"And it's too late for me. Curse the biological clock!"

With exquisite timing, Basienka plonked herself in her mother's lap. Zoska hugged her.

"Still, you two will benefit. No more seed and egg, just egg and egg."

"Omelette."

"Don't be facetious, you dreadful child. Other dreadful child, don't spill my coffee!"

Complete independence, I thought, as she fussed over Basienka. It had been the inevitable consequence of the Sisters' path, an ideal from the beginnings of the ghetto. Just because I had once been friendly with a man did not mean I regretted this innovation, that cast my kind adrift from his. Benedict, I was a Sister first, and there was no changing it.

"How did it go last night?" asked Zoska, munching fruit.

"All fixed."

"Good girl."

"How about you?"

"I talked my head off, first to Marthe, then I had tea with the Scouts and dropped in on the softcore leaders. On the way home I was met by the faction of hardcores at odds with Marthe. We're getting an Edge City."

"There's still the Elders."

"A Scout talked on the flute with Boz, and she sent the Elders a rocket, saying Marthe was behaving like a heavy father. I thought that too, but it takes the Head of Haven to say it and remain unscathed."

She gestured at the radio.

"But this news has done it."

I finished my coffee and lounged back

"Sure it's wonderful, but how does it affect Raffy 'n' Honey?"

"Well it's like I'm fighting with the baby and the sky rains honey apples. Instant end to hostilities as we gorge."

"Honey apple," said Basienka.

"Silly," I said. "Now you'll have to get her one."

"Honey apple."

"Later, sweet tooth," said Zoska. "Talking of H O-N-E-Y I saw her."

I sat up straight, rocking the bed.

"What she say, what she say?"

"She loves you."

I jumped off the bed and capered around it, followed by the imitative Basienka.

"She got Marthe out of the room to tell me that. Not as submissive as I thought."

"My bad influence."

"No doubt. But I still think you'll be doing the fighting when that girl leaves the ghetto."

"What if I take her to Haven?"

"A good compromise."

She paused.

"Is it as utopic as Boz claims?"

"We're working on it," I said.

"You do that. I'll stay at home, old imperfect ghetto, in case Haven goes . . ."

"Dystopic?"

"Dystopic. Forget I said that. I just realised I'm being thrown out with the bathwater. Still, it's the best way to get Marthe out of your hair, which now I think of it—"

She put her head on one side.

"—needs a cut."

She hopped out of bed.

"Let me bully you for the last time."

First she made me wash in the little bathroom cluttered with water-toys, then combed down my damp mop and trimmed it. With an air of relish, she next produced respectable clothes, bought in between the visits of the day before. There were grey pants, grey shirt, smart black boots and a stiff, sobersides hat. As I admired my well-

behaved self in the bedroom mirror, I noticed her sidling out the door with my old gaudy rags.

"What are you doing?"

"Throwing these out."

"Including the scarf, your handiwork?"

She pulled it out and inspected it.

"No! But it's filthy. I'll get you another."

She rummaged in her workbasket and withdrew a strip of linen embroidered with pink cherry blossoms. I wondered vaguely if there was a cosmic conspiracy to remind me of Benedict Zoska had never seen the flowers, the dogs had prevented me plucking one for her. Smiling wryly, I put the scarf on.

"You look very eligible," she said and kissed me.

"Honey apple," said the repeating machine.

"Come on," I said. "Let's buy one for her."

Outside the little street was bustling with womyn, some carrying flowers and all smiling

"What's this?" I said to nobody in particular and a passing softcore replied:

"Party in the main square. To celebrate!"

We strolled towards square and Hive, infected by the festive mood A junior Scout dashed by, came to a dead stop, twirled round and gaped at me. Recovering, she ran off in the opposite direction and returned with two giggling girlfriends, and the Watch Chief.

"Lay off," I said, embarrassed.

"Well," said the Chief, "you are nicely turned out."

"For the books," I muttered.

"Doesn't she look fine?" said Zoska.

"My word yes. Almost unrecognisable."

I clenched my fists behind my back, momentarily regretting that all my rowdiness must be past. To my annoyance, the Watch Chief fell into step with us, chatting to Zoska about weddings:

"I cried and cried when my eldest . . ."

"Honey apple," said the tireless Basienka.

"Soon, when we reach the square," I said. The Watch

Chief bent close to me:

"We whitewashed your graffiti."

"Censorship."

"It benefits you. Marthe was turning cartwheels every time she passed it."

"What a sight. Well, thank you."

But she was not finished yet. "One of my lasses let in Bea thus morning with a message for Marthe. From Grania."

She eyed me, awaiting the reaction.

"How nice," I said blithely. Maybe it was the festival ambience, but I felt as if I was riding the crest of a wave, which would not suddenly dump me in a welter of foam and sand. We were nearly at the square now, its proximity marked by music, the whiff of intoxicant, and thankfully for the little girl clasping my hand, a sticky-sweet smell.

"There you are, persistent child," said Zoska. "Raffy, do you want one?"

"Not in these clothes."

The Watch Chief had already, incongruously, been tempted by the confection.

In a procession of four, and attracting more womyn in our wake, hardcores, softcores, stray lovers, friends and the curious, we crossed the square to the Hive, our sunken fortress. The girl on guard was unexpectedly confronted by her superior, sticky.

"Tell Marthe she has visitors," said the Chief.

We waited, the crowd jostling and muttering around us. After a suitable delay, the door at the foot of the ramp opened and Marthe, flanked by the two hardcore Elders, ascended.

"Greetings, Raphael Grania," she said formally.

"Greetings, Marthe Maria," I replied, tit for tat.

I saw her gaze roll down my attire, but being as good an actor as Grania, she made no verbal or physical comment.

"I have received a verse letter from Grania Erato. It commends our alliance."

Behind me, I heard Zoska intake breath in gleeful

surprise and then let it out slowly, as if she would have liked to whoop. Several of the rowdier Scouts actually cheered, and this was picked up by the young, the noisy and the disaffected. It was in the end an impressive sound, threatening even. Marthe suddenly looked, and I think felt, vulnerable.

"I am, of course, honoured to communicate with the great poet."

And mediocre parent, I thought.

"Having long admired her verse, I am pleased—my words can't express how much—to be given a holograph sample of it."

And to be the subject of it, I thought. Vanity! I could tell her it was no pleasure.

"For some reason," she added, her tone changing, "it's called '*To a Fellow Widow Twankey*' "

She looked flustered; the crowd, equally puzzled, was silent.

"I never understand all her allusions," I said quickly, well-knowing Granna's dangerous humour. "Marthe Maria! Has my mother's intervention changed your mind?"

She regained a little of her dark composure.

"The Elders have informed me that in a day of such celebration, Hive cannot be off-limits. In view of that, the letter, and other factors . . ."

She looked pointedly at someone behind me, from the opposite faction of hardcores, I presumed.

"I have no choice but to withdraw the prohibition."

Zoska hugged me, releasing Basienka, who for some time had been tugging at her mother's hand. Seizing the opportunity, she ran down the ramp and through the slit of door held open by the Watchgirl. There were stairs behind that door—Zoska looked over my shoulder and screamed. The guard started and let the door clang shut.

There was a moment of agony and then the door opened slowly again. My Honey came out cradling my foster-sister.

Beautiful Honeycomb! I wanted to shout it, but that

would have ruined everything. Instead I stood silent as a doll, watching Basienka offer Honey some of her apple. Honey, smiling, took a bite and the crowd went "Ooh!"

"Little scene-stealer," muttered Zoska. She walked halfway down the ramp and collected the baby. Marthe took *her* baby by the hand for a moment: goodbye. Then we faced each other, with no womyn between us.

"Get a move on," yelled somebody.

So, shyly, we met at the top of the ramp and kissed. The ghetto cheered and we parted, half-embarrassed by the noise. Her lips had tasted sweet from the candied fruit.

"Honeymouth," I said.

"Yes, that is her name," said her mother. "Honey Marthe."

And I laughed, and Honey laughed, and it was all right.

SOURCES

"Apple", by John Baxter, is from *New Writings in Science Fiction. 10*, edited by John Carnell (Corgi Books, 1966).

"Coming Back", by Damien Broderick, is from *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (December 1982).

"Report on the Shadow Industry", by Peter Carey, is from his collection, *The Fat Man in History* (University of Queensland Press, 1974). The story is reproduced by permission of Rogers, Coleridge & White Ltd.

"All Laced Up", by A. Bertram Chandler, is from *New Worlds* (November 1961).

"Shatterwrack at Breaklight", by Terry Dowling, is from *Omega Science Digest* (July 1985)

"Axiomatic", by Greg Egan, is from *Interzone* (November 1990).

"A Way Back", by Leanne Frahm, is from *Universe 13*, edited by Terry Carr (Doubleday, 1983).

"The Juronka Validation", by Van Ikin, first appeared (in a different form, as "The Juronka Chamber") in *Omega Science Digest* (November 1986).

"Death of a Thousand Cuts", by David Ireland, is from *Australian Short Stories 1* (1982).

"Creator", by David Lake, is from *Envisaged Worlds*, edited by Paul Collins (Void Publications, 1978).

"Trickster", by Rosaleen Love, is from *The Total Devotion Machine* by Rosaleen Love, first published by The Women's Press Ltd, London, 1989 (34 Great Sutton Street, London EC1V ODX, UK). The story is used by permission of The Women's Press Ltd.

"Inhabiting the Interspaces", by Philippa Maddern, is from *Transmutations*, edited by Rob Gerrand (Outback Press, 1979).

"The Colours of the Masters", by Sean McMullen, is from *Fantasy and Science Fiction* (March 1988). The author's original (longer) version is used here.

"My Lady Tongue", by Lucy Sussex, is from *Matilda at the Speed of Light*, edited by Damien Broderick (Angus & Robertson, 1988). It was winner of the 1989 Ditmar Award for Best Australian Short Science Fiction.

"The Fittest", by George Turner, is from *Urban Fantasies*, edited by David King and Russell Blackford (Ebony Books, 1985). It was subsequently expanded into his award-winning novel, *The Sea and Summer*.

"The Ark of James Carlyle", by Cherry Wilder, is from *New Writings in SF: 24*, edited by Kenneth Bulmer (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1974). It was the first story by a woman to appear in the *New Writings in SF* series.

"The Man of Slow Feeling", by Michael Wilding, is from *The Second Pacific Book of Science Fiction* (reissued as *Australian Science Fiction 2*), edited by John Baxter (Angus & Robertson, 1971).

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

John Baxter's stories appeared in *New Worlds*, *Analog* and other magazines during the 1960s. A novel, *The Off-Worlders*, was published by Ace in 1966. He also wrote *Science Fiction in the Cinema* and edited two pioneering anthologies of Australian science fiction. In 1969 he moved to London, where he wrote the novel *The Hermes Fall*.

Since then, he has specialised in cinema. He wrote and presented the ABC TV series *First Take* and *Filmstruck*, and has just completed the biography of Federico Fellini. A crime novel, *Bondi Blues*, was published in 1993. He lives with his wife and daughter in Paris, where he is working on a life of Luis Buñuel.

Damien Broderick, a Melbourne writer, is "perhaps the most outstanding Australian author currently writing" (*New Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*). He sold his first short story collection at twenty, and his seven novels have "provided the intellectual cutting edge" in Australian sf (*Twentieth-Century Science Fiction Writers*). A range of styles and topics is explored: *The Judas Mandala* is narrated by a feminist poet, while *The Black Grail* is a far-future "heroic fantasy".

His novel *The Dreaming Dragons* was named one of the 99 best sf books in English since Orwell's *1984*, and three of Broderick's novels have received the Australian SF Achievement Award (the Ditmar), most recently the sf comedy *Striped Holes*. Broderick has edited three anthologies of Australian speculative fiction, including *Strange*

Attractors and *Matilda at the Speed of Light*. A frequent book reviewer (currently for *The Australian*), he holds a doctorate in the semiotics of scientific and literary discourses.

Peter Carey grew up in Bacchus Marsh, Victoria. His first book of stories, *The Fat Man in History*, became a best-seller and established his literary reputation. After a second volume of stories, *War Crimes* (which won the NSW Premier's Award), he turned to writing novels and achieved immediate (and immense) popular and critical success with *Bliss*. The film of *Bliss* won three Australian Film Institute Awards, including best film, and the novel itself won the NSW Premier's Award, the Miles Franklin Award, and the National Book Council Award. The next novel, *Illywhacker*, won even more awards and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and then *Oscar and Lucinda* actually won the Booker Prize (together with the by now usual array of awards as well).

Carey's latest prize-winning novel is *The Tax Inspector*.

A. Bertram Chandler was born in England in 1912, and sailed the planet in vessels of various kinds (tramp steamers to troopships). He came to Australia in 1956 and continued his naval career by commanding merchant ships under Australian or New Zealand flags. Having been interested in science fiction since childhood, he turned to writing his own sf and soon established an international reputation, with over forty books to his name and translations into many languages (including Hungarian, Japanese, Russian, and Swedish).

His work has always been popular in America—he was Guest of Honour at the 40th World Science Fiction Convention in Chicago—and in the 1970s he gained an enormous following of Japanese sf fans.

A. Bertram Chandler died in 1984, Australia's most-loved and best-selling sf author. His best short stories are

selected in the prestige limited-edition volume, *From Sea to Shining Star* (1990).

Greg Egan was born in Perth in 1961, and holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Mathematics from the University of Western Australia. He has worked as a computer programmer in medical research, but is now currently writing full time.

He has published over thirty short stories in magazines and anthologies, and two novels, *An Unusual Angle* (Norstrilia Press, 1983) and *Quarantine* (Legend, 1992). The *Sydney Morning Herald* described *Quarantine* as "the fastest-moving Australian sf novel yet". In *The Year's Best SF, Eighth Annual Collection* Gardner Dozois celebrated the growing reputation of this "hot new Australian writer" by saying, "1990 was the year when Egan suddenly seemed to be turning up everywhere with high-quality stories . . . My guess is that he is on his way, and with considerable velocity . . "

Egan has recently completed a new science fiction novel, *Permutation City*, which will be published in the UK by Millennium early in 1994.

Leanne Frahm was born a Queenslander and writes from North Queensland, using the local environments as settings for many of her stories. She started writing following a workshop conducted by George Turner and Terry Carr in 1978, and has since seen her short stories published in Australia and the US, and was the first Australian woman writer to be published in a major American magazine.

Nominated for the Ditmar Award several times, she first won it in 1981.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* described Frahm as "an extremely talented and intelligent writer", declaring that her story "Anzac Day" (in Leigh Blackmore's horror collection, *Terror Australis*) proves that "Stephen King could one day face a female Aussie rival".

David Ireland is one of Australia's most acclaimed novelists. He was born in Sydney, has lived in many places and worked in a variety of occupations, and now lives and writes in Goulburn in the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales.

His first novel, *The Chantic Bird* (1968), won the Adelaide *Advertiser* prize, and he has subsequently won the prestigious Miles Franklin Award for *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* (1971), *The Glass Canoe* (1976), and *A Woman of the Future* (1979); the latter also shared the *Age* Book of the Year Award. Other novels are *Burn* (1974), *The Flesheaters* (1972), *City of Women* (1981), *Archimedes and the Seagle* (1984), and *Bloodfather* (1987).

David Ireland received the Order of Australia in 1981.

He is currently working on a novel called *Dry Australians.*

David Lake was born in India of British parents in 1929, and has been addicted to reading science fiction since the age of 11. He was educated in India and England, first wanting to be an astronomer, then reading English at Cambridge. He taught school in England until 1959, then took up two-year stints under British Council auspices in South-East Asia (Vietnam, Thailand, India, 1959–67). He finally settled in Brisbane as a lecturer at the University of Queensland, where he is now an Associate Professor—and teaches, among other things, a course in science fiction.

He is the author of more than a dozen books, including a volume of poetry, critical studies of John Milton, Thomas Middleton, and Greek tragedy, and many science fiction novels, including *Walkers on the Sky*, *The Fourth Hemisphere*, *The Changelings of Chaan*, and *The Man Who Loved Morlocks* (a sequel to the H.G. Wells classic, *The Time Machine*). His short stories have appeared in numerous anthologies.

Rosaleen Love enjoys exploring new myths and even creating some of her own. She lectures at Swinburne University in Melbourne, teaching both fiction writing and the history and philosophy of science, and sometimes she gets the two hopelessly confused.

Tired of reading the histories of science in which women are rarely mentioned, she decided to set the situation right. She is delighted "Trickster" has been chosen for this anthology as it is a personal favourite of hers. (Once it existed as a 178 page novel. The short story is all that remains.)

She has published in a number of Australian magazines and her short stories have been collected together in two books by The Women's Press, *The Total Devotion Machine* (1989) and *Evolution Annie* (1993). She is working on a novel, *Xixia*, a cyberspace romance.

Philippa Maddern was born in Albury-Wodonga in 1952 and spent her childhood in various Victorian country towns. She completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Indonesian Studies at Melbourne University, and spent four years at Oxford producing a D. Phil. in medieval British history. She attended two writers' workshops held in Melbourne in 1975 (with Ursula le Guin as writer-in-residence) and 1977, from which emerged her first published fiction. Since 1985 she has taught History at Melbourne and Monash Universities, and has also worked as a computer systems programmer. She now lectures in history at The University of Western Australia. Apart from writing fiction, and researching and teaching history, she is interested in women's studies, woodwork, and medieval music.

Sean McMullen works in the Systems Planning Section of the Bureau of Meteorology in Melbourne. While studying history, physics and computing at university, he had a variety of other jobs, including laboratory assistant

in the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, and singer with the Victorian State Opera.

In 1985 he won the writing competition at the World SF Convention, and he went on to win the Australian SF Award (Ditmar) for fiction in 1991 and 1992. He has had stories published in Australia, America and Britain, and his first book, *Call to the Edge*, was published by Aphelion in 1992.

He is married with one daughter.

Nick Stathopoulos, who painted the cover for *Mortal Fire*, is one of Australia's leading artists of the fantastic. Originally trained as a lawyer, with an Arts/Law degree from Macquarie University, his book-cover paintings include A. Bertram Chandler's *From Sea to Shining Star*, Sean McMullen's *Call to the Edge*, and Terry Dowling's *Rynosseros*, *Wormwood*, *Blue Tyson*, and *Twilight Beach*. He has won several Ditmar Awards for his artwork.

A full-time commercial artist, Stathopoulos currently produces computer graphics and game covers for the Strategic Studies Group.

He lives in Blacktown, NSW.

Lucy Sussex was born in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1957. After periods in France and England she moved to Australia in 1971 and studied English and Anthropology at James Cook and Monash Universities.

She currently works as a researcher and writer. She has written a book for children, *The Peace Garden* (1989), and a teenage novel, *Deersnake*, is forthcoming from Hodder and Stoughton. She has written reviews and critical articles, mostly with a feminist bent, and is also a literary archaeologist, particularly in the area of nineteenth-century women crime writers, editing the works of Mary Fortune (the first woman detective writer in Australia) and Ellen Davitt (a previously unknown sister-in-law of Anthony Trollope).

Her collection of short stories, *My Lady Tongue and*

Other Tales, was published by Heinemann in 1990. The title story won a Ditmar Award.

George Turner is Australia's most eminent sf novelist. Born in Melbourne in 1916, he had what he describes as a "haphazard" education and served in World War 2 as an infantry Lieutenant in North Africa, the Middle East, and New Guinea. He began writing mainstream realist novels in 1958, winning the Miles Franklin Award for *The Cupboard Under the Stairs*. His first novel, *Young Man of Talent*, has come to be seen as an important contribution to Australian war fiction.

Turner began his career as a science fiction novelist with his three "Ethical Culture" novels—*Beloved Son*, *Vaneglory*, and *Yesterday's Men*. His major work, *The Sea and Summer* (1987) won the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Commonwealth Writers Prize and attracted critical acclaim around the world. Subsequent novels—*Brain Child* and *The Destiny Makers*—have consolidated his reputation as a creator of "stunning idea-driven science fiction" and have done much to draw attention to the quality of sf being produced in Australia.

George Turner is also one of Australia's leading sf reviewers and critics. His short stories are collected in *A Pursuit of Miracles* (Aphelion, 1990).

Cherry Wilder was born in New Zealand in 1930, and published stories and reviewed for *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* before turning to sf and fantasy. Her novels include *The Luck of Brin's Five* (1977), which introduced the marsupial people of the planet Torin, the fantasy trilogy *The Rulers of Hylor* (1984–87), and *Second Nature* (1982), the story of a castaway society which is continued in the recently completed *Signs of Life*. Her stories have appeared in *Interzone*, *Omni*, *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Best New Horror*, and *Terror Australis: The Best of Australian Horror*.

She moved to Germany in 1976 with her husband, Horst Grimm (1928–92), and their daughters Cathie and Louisa.

"The Ark of James Carlyle" was the first story by a woman to be published in the long-running British *New Writings in SF* anthology series, and has subsequently been translated, and reprinted in a range of anthologies including *Great Short Stories of Australia and New Zealand* (published by *Reader's Digest*, 1980).

Michael Wilding has taken a major role in the shaping of Australian literature, being a key figure (as writer, editor, publisher, and critic) in the changes that altered the face of Australian fiction in the late 1960s and 70s. His novels include *Living Together*, *The Short Story Embassy*, *Pacific Highway* and *The Paraguayan Experiment*, and amongst his many short story collections are *The Phallic Forest*, *The West Midland Underground*, *Reading the Signs*, *Under Saturn*, *Great Climate*, and *The Man of Slow Feeling: Selected Short Stories*.

Critical studies include books on Marvell and Milton as well as *Political Fictions*, *Social Visions*, and several works on Marcus Clarke which have resulted in a major re evaluation of the work of this early writer. By championing experimental writing and offering articulate opposition to the pre-eminence given to realism in Australian literature, Wilding has played an important role in fostering a climate more favourable to Australian sf.

Michael Wilding has a personal chair in English and Australian Literature at the University of Sydney.

RECOMMENDED READING

The list below, like the book itself, is just *a* set of selections. It includes several stories which we would have liked to use in *Mortal Fire* (but couldn't, for reasons of length or copyright). Most of these items should be easy enough to track down, either through libraries or bookshops (especially sf specialist bookshops), but a couple might provide the thrill of a chase.

We have set out a select roll-call of current Australian sf, and, to give ourselves a challenge, we represent each author by just *one* entry. . . .

John Baxter: "Beach", in *Australian Science Fiction 1*, edited by John Baxter (Angus & Robertson, 1968; originally published as *The Pacific Book of Australian SF*).

Damien Broderick: "The Magi", in *The Dark Between the Stars*, by Damien Broderick (Mandarin Australia, 1991).

Simon Brown: "All the Fires of Lebanon", in *Aurealis* 6 (1991).

Peter Carey: "Conversations with Unicorns", in *The Fat Man in History*, by Peter Carey (University of Queensland Press, 1974) or *The Zeitgeist Machine*, edited by Damien Broderick (Angus & Robertson, 1977).

A. Bertram Chandler: "Giant Killer", in *From Sea to Shining Star*, edited by Keith Curtis and Susan Chandler (Dreamstone, 1990).

Paul Collins: "The Government in Exile", in *Urban*

Fantasies, edited by David King and Russell Blackford (Ebony Books, 1985).
Terry Dowling: "The Robot Is Running Away from the Trees", in *Rynosseros*, by Terry Dowling (Aphelion, 1990).
Greg Egan: "The Caress", in *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* (January 1990).
Leanne Frahm: "Culture", in *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature* 11 (June, 1982).
Bruce Gillespie: "What God Said to Me When He Lived Next Door", in *Dreamworks*, edited by David King (Norstrilia Press, 1983).
Lee Harding: *Displaced Person* (Hyland House, 1979).
Van Ikin: "And Eve Was Drawn from the Rib of Adam", in *Envisaged Worlds*, edited by Paul Collins (Void Publications, 1978).
David Ireland: *City of Women* (Allen Lane, 1981).
Sue Isle: "Daybreak", in *Aurealis* 8 (1992).
David King: "Impressionism Park", in *Omega Science Digest* (March 1985).
David Lake: *The Man Who Loved Morlocks* (Hyland House, 1981).
Rosaleen Love: "The Sea-Serpent of Sandy Cape", in *The Total Devotion Machine*, by Rosaleen Love (The Women's Press, 1989) or *Glass Reptile Breakout*, edited by Van Ikin (CSAL, 1990).
Philippa Maddern: "Things Fall Apart", in *Matilda at the Speed of Light*, edited by Damien Broderick (Angus & Robertson, 1988).
Geoffrey Maloney: "Requiem for the General", in *Eidolon* 7 (Summer, 1992).
Brian Matthews: "The Funerals", in *Quickening and Other Stories*, by Brian Matthews (Penguin/McPhee Gribbble, 1989).
Kevin McKay: "Pie Row Joe", in *Rooms of Paradise*, edited by Lee Harding (Quartet Books, 1978); re-issued by Penguin Books).
Sean McMullen: "Alone in His Chariot", in *Call to the Edge*, by Sean McMullen (Aphelion, 1992).

Gerald Murnane: *The Plains* (Norstrilia Press, 1982).
Michael Pryor: "Long Live the King", in *Aurealis* 6 (1991).
Lucy Sussex: "God and Her Black Sense of Humour", in *My Lady Tongue and Other Tales*, by Lucy Sussex (Heinemann Australia, 1990).
George Turner: *The Sea and Summer* (Faber & Faber, 1987).
Cherry Wilder: "The Ballad of Hilo Hill", in *Strange Attractors*, edited by Damien Broderick (Hale & Iremonger, 1985).
Michael Wilding: "See You Later", in *Great Climate*, by Michael Wilding (Faber & Faber, 1990), or in *The Zeitgeist Machine*, edited by Damien Broderick (Angus & Robertson, 1977) under the title "Illumination".
Sean Williams: "Light Bodies Falling", in *Aurealis* 6 (1991).
Jack Wodhams: "One Clay Foot", in *Alien Worlds*, edited by Paul Collins (Void Publications, 1979), or *Australian Science Fiction*, edited by Van Ikin (University of Queensland Press, 1982).

MAGAZINES

New Australian sf writing appears regularly in the following publications, all of which are worthy of (and in need of) support. If you want to keep Australian sf diverse and healthy and plentiful, give thought to taking out a subscription and asking your local library to subscribe as well.

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The Mentor, edited by Ron Clarke; 78 Redgrave Road, Normanhurst, NSW 2076.
—and, for writers: *The Australian SF Writers' News*, edited by Steven Paulsen and Rick Kennett; P.O. Box 461, Belgrave, Vic. 3160.

ANTHOLOGIES

We recommend the following anthologies for their coverage of Australian sf:

John Baxter (ed.): *The Pacific Book of Australian SF* (Angus & Robertson, 1968); re-issued as *Australian Science Fiction 1.*

——(ed.): *The Second Pacific Book of Science Fiction* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971); re-issued as *Australian Science Fiction 2.*

Damien Broderick (ed.): *The Zeitgeist Machine* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1977).

——(ed.): *Strange Attractors* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1985).

——(ed.): *Matilda at the Speed of Light* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1988).

Paul Collins (ed.): *Alien Worlds* (Melbourne: Void Publications, 1979).

——(ed.): *Distant Worlds* (Melbourne: Cory & Collins, 1981).

——(ed.): *Frontier Worlds* (Melbourne: Cory & Collins, 1983).

Rob Gerrand (ed.): *Transmutations* (Melbourne: Outback Press in association with Norstrilia Press, 1979).

Lee Harding (ed.): *Rooms of Paradise* (Melbourne: Quartet, 1978).

Van Ikin (ed.): *Glass Reptile Breakout and Other Australian Speculative Stories* (Perth: CSAL, 1990).

David King (ed.): *Dreamworks* (Melbourne: Norstrilia Press, 1983).

David King and Russell Blackford (eds): *Urban Fantasies* (Melbourne: Ebony Books, 1985).

Readers with an interest in the historical development of Australian sf (from its earliest beginnings to 1980) should consult:

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